

# PLAIN STORIES

FALL  
1946  
200

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# PLANET STORIES



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# DREAD-FLAME OF M'TONAK

By HENRY HASSE

*A flame of pure thought . . . green and unspeakably vile . . . thrust from its own supra-dimension into the Solar warp, it found one whose malignance matched its own—and who would bargain with it. Against them—Ketrik, outlawed and alone!*

KETRIK came in from Perlac, came fast, using the Frequency Tuner all the way. Now his great bulk came forward in the control-seat, his eyes fastened intently on the dark blue disk of Earth that loomed ahead.

"Strange," he muttered. "Strange, no Patrolters! I expected an escort at least, if not a challenge!"

But no one heard. Ketrik, as always, had come alone. The helio from Mark Travers, recorded on the sensitized receivers at Perlac, had been more than a summons and a plea; it had contained an undertone of urgency. Ketrik had left at once, making the trip from the newly discovered outer planet in record time, thanks to the secret power-unit which the Earth Council still coveted.

Ketrik thought of that now, as he stared Earth where he had not set foot for so long. He remembered the tedious negotiations between Earth and Perlac, designed to bring the latter planet into the Solar Federation—a status hardly equitable to the Perlac government, due to Earth's high-handed demands. For Earth still claimed priority on Brownell's "Frequency Tuner," despite the fact that he had been forced to flee with his invention to Perlac; and since then there had been an alarming exodus of Earth's scientists to Perlac where they could work out their ideas unhindered.\*

The Earth Council remained haughty, adamant. Only six months ago there had been a skirmish beyond Jupiter in which several Earth Patrolters had gone to flaming destruction against the speedy Perlac ships. The "Percac Incident" was developing into open, bitter warfare. Venus remained wisely aloof, riding a crest of peace under the reign of Princess Aladdin.

And on Mars, Dar Vaajo sat brooding on his ancient throne, silent and watchful.

"Maybe I'm being a fool," Ketrik murmured now as he crossed the orbit of Earth's moon. "Mark Travers guaranteed me safe landing and full protection—nevertheless—"

Wary but still cautious, he switched to the auxiliary rocket-power, then went to work dismantling the Frequency Tuner. In a short time he had jumbled the unit into a confusion of its component parts, and carefully hid it away. He trusted Mark Travers . . . but there were others.

As he picked up the grav-beam for his landing, he thought again of Mark. It would be good to see him again after four years. He wondered if the lad's status as "Member of Council" had changed him any. Even more, he wondered at Mark's urgent message.

The city spread below. Then the landing field. Ketrik berthed with practiced ease, stepped down from the lock.

THE GUARDS closed in fast. There were dozens of them. Ketrik had only time to glimpse the black-and-silver insignia of the elite Council Guard, the drawn guns and grim purpose on their faces. Even as he whirled back toward his ship, the deadly song of a heat-beam sounded past his ear—so close he could feel the swirling scorch of it.

Ketrik came erect and motionless. He turned slowly, brain wry with the thought that he'd come into a trap after all. But he smiled—a twisted smile which failed to erase the hard lines of his face. His eyes were a puzzle, gray and serene but somehow mocking beneath the dark bags twinkling across his forehead.

The Guards formed a watchful circle about this man whose deeds were renowned

\**Excerpt to Planet X, Planet Books, Winter, 1941.*





*It began to move upward . . . to beat against  
Ketrik, surging . . . tearing . . .*

throughout the System. For a moment their Captain hesitated. Then, squaring his shoulders, he stepped forward. His gun became intimate with Ketrík's wish-bone.

"George Ketrík, I arrest you by order of the Supreme Earth Council! You will come along peaceably or suffer the consequences!" The man's voice was overly loud, arrogant. With a dramatic gesture he removed Ketrík's gun, then whirled him into the hands of the Guards. They marched toward a waiting tube-car. Other guards were trying to keep back the crowd, passengers for the Venus Express who thronged the field.

Ketrík's eyes were emotionless now, devoid of color. He said tonelessly: "Taking quite a chance, aren't you, Captain? I've only counted fifty of your men."

"We've heard too much about you, Ketrík! And we want you alive—that's why we didn't try to take you in space. I'm glad you're being sensible about this."

Ketrík shrugged his towering shoulders as though to say, "Why not?" But his mind raced. So they wanted him alive. They were nearing the tube-car now, and the crowd, eternally curious, was trying to press in.

It was now or never. Ketrík stumbled. His elbow shot back, caught the captain in the stomach. With the same motion he snatched the latter's heat-gun, and bending low, lunged to the left. The crowd parted before his onrush. Women screamed at sight of the gun he waved before him.

Ketrík heard shouts and curses from the startled guard, but he knew they wouldn't fire into the crowd. A uniformed man loomed before him, swinging a gun-fist up. Ketrík was quicker. The guard went down from a sledge-hammer blow. Grinning joyously, Ketrík evaded two others. He twisted and turned through the crowd, with some notion of gaining the tube-car and escaping into the heart of the city.

And it might have worked. Now a path was opening clear. But this time he really stumbled, lost his balance momentarily. It was enough to allow the guards to close voice of the captain. He swung out with in. Ketrík twisted erect, felt clutching hands upon him and heard the bellowing his arms, felt men flung backward. He tried to bring up the heat-gun.

This time someone else was quicker.

A heavy weight crashed against Ketrík's head, a sun exploded into millions of fragments which dwindled away as he plunged forward into darkness.

**H**E REGAINED his faculties quickly. His subconsciousness demanded it. This curious "awareness" in which Ketrík had trained himself had saved him from many a tight scrape.

But now he did not open his eyes at once. He knew he was in the tube-car, for he could feel the cushioned seat beneath him and the faint vibration of the gyro-motors. Then he became aware of another fact.

He was alone.

This brought him to his feet, wide-eyed and alert. He felt the weight of his own gun again in his belt, examined it, found it still loaded. Strange!

Where were the guards? Why should they be sending him somewhere alone? A glance at the *crystyte* window revealed a flashing panorama of the city. He knew he was moving at terrific speed, probably on a special "right-of-way." To attempt an escape now would be suicide.

He shrugged, settled down in the seat. His capture had been well planned, but he failed to see what the Council hoped to gain by it! Ketrík felt a surge of cold fury at this treachery—a treachery in which Mark Travers must have had a hand.

Presently a braking signal flashed green. The tiny car sighed, as though exhausted from its headlong route across the city. It came to a stop against the forward cushion of air, and doors of *duraplon* slid smoothly back.

Hand near his gun, Ketrík emerged into a long empty corridor of black and silver. Black marble walls reached sheerly up, to curve away into a filigreed ceiling. Priceless tapestries adorned the walls, caught a hidden overhead glow and shattered it into lances of silver radiance. Ketrík frowned, looking at these tapestries. Their design was interwoven with thousands of *Kru* plumes, those priceless silvery plumes for which he'd risked his life many times among the wild peaks of Ganymede. Only the very elect could afford them. He knew now, that he must be in Earth's Council Chambers.



*Dar Vaajo was old but he was still tough and wiry.*

Again he felt a tingling awareness, knew that unseen eyes were upon him. He straightened his shoulders and walked unhurriedly toward a massive door at the end of the corridor. As he neared it, there came a tiny click and the door slid back.

It was a large room but startlingly bare. A huge table of Martian *majagua* wood, with a dozen surrounding chairs, occupied the center. The only other article was a magnificent Ethero-Magnum, with screen reaching nearly to the ceiling—an instrument powerful enough for communication with Venus, Mars, even the Callistan colonies.

To Ketrik's surprise, only one Member of Council was present. This man had risen as Ketrik entered. Ketrik stared and it took him fully a minute to recognize this man. It had been four years since he had last seen him, out there at Perlac—but now Mark Travers seemed to have aged twenty years!

Mark came slowly around the table, hand thrust out in greeting.

Ketrik's voice was like a whiplash.

"Nice going, Travers! I trusted you, so I came right into your little trap! What is it you want—the Frequency Tuner? Or am I just plain under arrest?"

Mark stopped in his tracks. A pained look swept across his features. Ketrik went on mercilessly.

"And I expected a better reception than this! Where's the rest of the Council? I'll save you time, though, and tell you that Perlac has ceased negotiating. We're prepared to fight for our independence and free enterprise in the System!"

"I know that, Ketrik. I'll continue to champion Perlac's cause against all odds here!" Grim-faced, Mark began pacing the room. "As for the other eleven Council Members—they don't even know that you've arrived on Earth. I'm risking my position in Council, perhaps my very life, by bringing an outsider into these chambers without a quorum present!"

Ketrik's mien underwent a change. "You mean I'm not under arrest?"

MARK LAUGHED. "Of course you're not! That little show at the spaceport was faked, had to be. And," he smiled a little, "thanks for adding the touch of realism. Moreover, your spacer is in safe hands."

"Well, son, congratulations!" Ketrik grinned broadly. "You sure had me fooled. But what about the rest of the Council, if they learn that I'm on Earth—"

"By the time they do, it won't matter. You won't be here." Mark stopped his pacing, turned to the famed adventurer. "Ketrik, I sent for you because I need you desperately! Earth needs you! I have reason to believe that Earth is facing the greatest danger in its history."

"Earth." The bronzed exile spoke the word quietly, but with a world of contempt.

"Well, then, the entire System! Even Perlac. I believe it will strike first at Earth, in fact may already have done so."

"And this danger. Danger from what?"

"Ketrik, you'll probably think me a fool—but I don't know! It's so damned vague it's terrifying. I do have an accumulation of data that points to Mars. I want you to go there."

"Mars? A second-rate power. Their race is dying out, and their science goes with it."

Mark shook his head. "Don't underestimate Dar Vaajo! He's an old man now, but cunning. An opportunist. He's never

forgotten how Princess Aladdian of Venus, through her treaty with Earth, put an end to his dreams of conquest."\*

"Yes, I remember it well." Ketrik was thoughtful. "But how could Dar Vaajo make a play now against the power of Earth, or for that matter Perlac?"

Mark permitted himself a smile. He didn't miss the implication that Perlac, too, was fast becoming a power to be reckoned with.

"I'll give you the facts," he said quietly, "and you can judge. About two years ago, Dar Vaajo stopped all Uranium shipments from Mars. That in itself is comparatively unimportant. What is important, is the Earth Council. Now consider, Ketrik—I've been close to these men for four years. Very often it has seemed to me that where rudimentary logic should dictate a course of action, they incomprehensibly choose to follow another. So it was with this Uranium embargo. They might easily have forced a showdown, but instead, they seemed satisfied with Dar Vaajo's peculiar evasions.

"Of course, about this time Earth's quarrel with Perlac was reaching a crisis. But even there, I noticed definite trends of irrational thinking on the part of the Members. At our frequent sessions to discuss the Perlac question, they seemed to appreciate all the factors involved—even that we were fast losing our best scientific talent to Perlac. Yet their damned egotisms crept through, dictating to their reason. Ketrik, I swear to you that when they voted sending a fleet of Patrolters out to Jupiter to prevent your men from landing there, I did everything in my power to prevent it. But again my voice was one against eleven. And believe me, the majority vote of Council is final—irrevocable."

"I have reason to know that," Ketrik said. "But, Mark, I still fail to see this danger you spoke of."

"I'm getting to it. And this is the part that's frightening. About a month ago, in my own home, I set up a secret Cerebro-Scanner. Know what that is?"

"Never heard of it."

"It's new, and plenty dangerous in the wrong hands. Works on a ray principle. Produces elaborate graphs of an individual's mental and emotional co-ordinates.

\**Alcatraz of the Starways*, Planet Stories, May, 1943.



Well, on a secret wave-length I probed the minds of my fellow Council Members!" Mark smiled. "Yes, I'd probably receive sentence of death if they knew, but the end justified the means. Ketric, the resulting graphs reveal that the cerebro-thalamic co-ordinates of the Council Members do not vary in the slightest! They are the same down to ten decimal points!"

Ketric gestured helplessly. "Is this important?"

Mark stared at him. "Important—it's unprecedented! Much the same as finding eleven identical sets of fingerprints! But what is worse, the graphs show ele-

ments of—of—it's hard to explain. Certainly not disloyalty! Rather the opposite. An *intense* loyalty, but governed by unreason. Their minds seem directed along a single channel, toward a definite end. And that is—the utter humbling of Perlac! Nothing else seems to matter!"

Ketric nodded. Then he asked the obvious question.

"Did you employ this Scanner on yourself?"

"To make the record complete—yes! Needless to say, this tenacity of purpose concerning Perlac is utterly missing from my own mental co-ordinates."



"Hm. How do you account for that?"

"I can't. But this mental trend in the others seems to be *induced*. Now, you begin to see the implications?"

Ketrik nodded slowly. "Yes, son, and you're right! It even begins to scare me a little. Suppose Dar Vaajo in some way has gained control of those eleven minds—is that what you mean? But why Dar Vaajo?"

"There's one more item that completes the pattern, and points to Mars. During the past year, as many as four of our spacers have disappeared on the Earth-Mars route. No trace has ever been found. However, about a month ago, a life-boat from the missing *Terra III* was found drifting near the orbit of our moon. Aboard was one survivor—Dr. Curt Ransome, the brilliant physicist and mathematician, returning from a lecture tour on Mars."

"And could you learn nothing from him?"

"No." Mark's voice was tragic. "We learned nothing, because—*his brilliant mind was gone!* The doctors say it's doubtful if he'll ever respond to treatment. He babbles incessantly, has the mind of a week-old infant!"

Ketrik was aghast. "What has the Council done?"

"Nothing, of course!" Mark laughed bitterly. "They're pre-occupied with Per-lac! I've personally contacted Dar Vaajo on the *Ethero-Magnum*. He expresses regret and puzzlement, offers every aid in tracing the disappearing ships. But there's an under-current of evasion. As a desperate measure I sent two secret operatives to Mars."

"Good," Ketrik nodded his approval. "They get through all right?"

"Yes, apparently just in time. Dar Vaajo has thrown a close guard about the planet. Anyway, my operatives managed to set up a communications base in the wilds of the K'Mari Range, half a day's flight from Turibek, capital of South Mars. I've contacted them twice. They report strange activities at Turibek, something in the nature of a vast scientific experiment! And another thing. Dar Vaajo apparently has made a truce with the Rajecs."

"The Rajecs! Those Martian Outlanders?" Ketrik's face was dark with real concern. This news seemed to af-

fect him more than anything Mark had said.

"We've really never learned much about those strange desert tribes," Mark went on. "But—"

"It's impossible!" Ketrik said. "Those Outlanders hate the Upper Martians with a hatred beyond our understanding. Nothing would impel them to make truce, absolutely *nothing!* I know, for I once lived among them for six months." Ketrik was as near to being excited as was possible for him. "Yes, Mark, I'll go to Mars. This really begins to interest me!"

## II

THEY SPENT much of that night in going over their plans. Ketrik had no misapprehensions about landing on Mars; he could do that despite Vaajo's patrols. Turibek presented the real problem.

Carefully he perused the tele-strip recordings from Mark's operatives, E-39 and EV-5. There had only been two reports, and they were brief.

"This last one was sent two weeks ago," Mark said, "and I haven't been able to contact them since. The channel's dead. I'm afraid it means their hide-out was discovered!"

Ketrik studied the rough map Mark had made, showing the location of the hide-out in the K'Mari Range, and its position from Turibek.

"This will help. I'll try to get over there, see if anything's left of their sending equipment. Then I want to make a try for the city. If I can get inside of Turibek, and maybe get a line on this scientific thing they're working up . . . I was at Turibek eight years ago, and know it fairly well."

"Here's a photo-static air view," Mark said. "Afraid it doesn't show much."

"It shows one thing," Ketrik said, studying the film. "Dar Vaajo's had a wall built completely around the city. That wasn't there eight years ago! And those towers stationed around the wall—what do you suppose they are?"

"Control towers. That's an electronic wall! And you'll observe there's another within the city itself, surrounding that group of buildings which must be the laboratories. Ketrik—if you ever get in

there . . ." His voice dwindled away in doubt.

"You don't think I can do it? I don't either, Mark—not as an Earthman!"

"Come. We'll fix that."

They passed through endless corridors, arrived finally at a large white-enameled room. It was complete with operating tables, instruments, plastics, ray-lamps—everything necessary to Earth's espionage system.

Ketrik stripped piecemeal, allowed every inch of his superbly muscled body to be subjected to the stinging Ulmo lamps. Gradually under the hot rays, the very pigmentation of his skin changed to the deep reddish-copper of a Martian. Mark proved himself an expert at this. Even the insides of Ketrik's ears did not escape the ray.

"Don't worry," Mark told him. "This will all wear off eventually."

"Yes? How long?"

"In about two years! Now, your eyes. You never saw a Martian with gray eyes. Look up just a moment."

A few drops of liquid, a harmless vegetable composition, changed Ketrik's eyes to a muddy golden color.

"Those bangs have got to come off!" Mark went to work in earnest. Ten minutes under another ray, and Ketrik's unruly hair was transformed into tight, crisp curls in keeping with the Martian fashion. His features presented the hardest problem, but Mark worked miracles with the plastics and equipment.

At last the job was done. When Ketrik surveyed himself in the mirror he saw a tall, somewhat arrogant Martian of the middle class, with slightly flaring nostrils, bulging cheekbones and lips curving in a thin, cruel smile. He nodded, more than satisfied.

Mark consulted his wrist-chrono. "Four hours until dawn. Better grab a few hours' sleep, it may be your last for a while."

"Sure, but I'll rest better if I know one thing. Where's my ship?"

"My guards moved it secretly to the underground repair locks. Right now it's undergoing as radical a change as I just performed on you." Mark smiled. "When you leave Earth, it will be in a slow-powered ore freighter ostensibly bound for the Moon!"

**A**N HOUR before the dawn, Mark awakened Ketrik. But Mark hadn't been idle in those hours. He handed the other a small, compact instrument.

"Here's a Scanner disc I just finished assembling. It only works within a very short range, but you may have need of it."

They took the swift tube-car across the city and arrived at the spaceport amidst surprising activity. A Callistan freighter had just berthed. Bright lights were trained upon it, men and trucks were moving about handling the cargo.

"I planned it for this hour," Mark explained, "because now less attention will be drawn to you. We can't be too careful." He pointed to a dark, far corner of the field where a clumsy bulk rested. "Believe it or not, that's your ship. The exterior's been changed but that's all. You still have the Frequency Tuner." They paused for a moment in solemn thought. "I can't impress upon you too much, Ketrik, what this—"

"That's right, Mark, you can't. So let's not mention it." Ketrik was brusque. "Believe me, son, I know what I'm up against."

"Send any news at all as to what Dar Vaajo's up to. If I learn that, I can rouse the people of Earth to preparedness in spite of the Council." He thrust out his hand. "I'll say goodbye now—and good luck!"

Ketrik said simply, "You'll be hearing from me, Mark." He moved across the field, keeping to the shadows, the collar of his space tunic turned up. He wondered how many of the men working about this field were Martian "Specials." Some of them, surely. If he, an Earthman, could be molded into Martian guise, Dar Vaajo could certainly perform the same miracle in reverse and probably had.

He reached his ship undetected. All was dark and quiet. The hull, he noticed, had been painted solid black. He entered and flicked on the lights. Mark was right, nothing on the inside had been changed.

He explored the ship to make sure. Then he moved forward to the control-console, remembering that this was supposed to be a clumsy Moon freighter. The rockets roared. The ship moved with slow acceleration up the step locks, to finally catapult into the stratosphere.

And five minutes later, just as he was



clearing Earth's gravity, he heard the voice behind him:

"Well, Ketrik, at last! Really—I thought you were never going to make it!"

Ketrik had long since learned caution in these matters. He turned slowly now and was glad he did. The first thing he saw was the gun—a powerful weapon, an electro. The fist wrapped around it looked firm and experienced. Ketrik's gaze went to the man's face.

It was the Captain of the Guard, the same captain who had met him at his landing eight hours before. The man was cold-eyed now. He kept a few paces away from Ketrik.

Ketrik said, "I searched the ship. Where were you?"

"You failed to look in the emergency fuel locker. It was a tight squeeze for me." He smiled tightly, surveying Ketrik's transformed figure. "A nice job. Slightly tall for a Martian but, withal very nice. Too bad all that ingenuity has to be wasted at the very outset."

Ketrik's muscles tightened. As though it were a signal, the other's voice became brittle.

"Up! Up with those hands, Ketrik. I have a few questions to ask, and then—"

**I**T SEEMED ridiculously easy, the way Ketrik did it. He let his eyes go dull. He sighed and raised his hands, slowly. He saw the other's gun-fist relax ever so slightly. Then Ketrik's legs gave way and he went swiftly downward. The captain fired but Ketrik wasn't there, his powerful muscles had launched him forward, beneath the hissing beam. His shoulder caught the other just below the midriff and bent him double, carried him backward. They crashed into the controlroom door. Ketrik's left hand found the other's gun-wrist and twisted powerfully. A bone snapped, the electro skidded away. The captain began a curse but it was cut short by Ketrik's right hand at his throat.

Ketrik pulled the man to a sitting posture. He gazed deep into the eyes which were glazing over with pain. But it was not enough to prevent the true color from shining through . . . the color of dull, tarnished gold.

"I thought so," Ketrik murmured, and then his hand loosened, balled into a fist that

drove forward. The man laid back and went limp.

Ketrik's fingers probed the other's face. The man was a Martian, all right, the features had been subtly altered. Enough to fool even Mark! Captain of the elite guard! How long had the man masqueraded in that position, Ketrik wondered—and then he shrugged. It didn't matter now.

He went through the man's clothes, found nothing of interest until he came under the left arm-pit. There, next to the skin, he found a tiny metal disk. He rose, went over to the wall-light to examine his find. The disk was perforated with queer Martian characters. Ketrik knew Martian, but he couldn't quite make these out. He bent closer.

A sixth sense warned him, or perhaps it was some slight sound. He whirled. The Martian's hand had moved, was now grasping the electro which he swung up into line. Ketrik's hand dropped and he fired his own heat-beam from the hip. The beam cut a clean swath across the other's chest, and he died without so much as a sigh.

"Sorry, buddy, whoever you are," Ketrik whispered. "Guess I'd have had to do that anyway, though. When Dar Vaajo plants Specials like you on Earth, we don't play for fun!"

He fastened the identification disk under his own armpit. Five minutes later, from the starboard lock, he dumped the body into space and without a qualm, rayed it to dust.

Then, champing with impatience, Ketrik allowed his "freighter" to plod Moonward. He skirted within five thousand miles of it, then with the satellite as a shield between him and Earth, he charted for Mars.

His brush with the Martian operative had sobered him. He began to realize that Mark had every reason for alarm! The subtle tampering with the Council's mental patterns, the placing of operatives in high Earth positions, the secret scientific experiments on Mars—they all had to tie in. He was sure of one thing now. Dar Vaajo, an embittered old man, was making one last bid which would bring his race to its former glory or else carry it forever to extinction with him.

There were surely other Martian opera-

tives on Earth, and they would have established a communications base. By this time they had undoubtedly flashed the news of his coming. Ketrik smiled inwardly. Very well—they'd be expecting him at Turibek, but he'd take the indirect approach.

All the way to Mars his mind was at work. He was remembering days he'd spent in that wild desert country of South Mars. From the tide of his thoughts he segregated events . . . places and people . . . the canals and cruel deserts, the customs of the Rajecs, those fierce black outcasts from the cities of Mars. He knew that before he got through to Turibek, he'd need all this. Already a plan was forming. . . .

Twenty hours later he sighted a Mars patrol, six formidable spacers athwart the Earth-route. They moved leisurely, in perfect formation, and Ketrik knew their network of "finder beams" covered a large area. However, the power-principle of the Frequency Tuner defied those "finders." No challenge came through his open radio, which meant they hadn't sighted him yet.

A solid black ship was strictly against the Space Code, but Codes mattered little now! With the ebony backdrop of space behind him, Ketrik's ship would be hard to detect. He decided to try a sneak past them. He'd have to go into Inferior-plane, but he was sure he could make it.

Quickly he changed course, swept into a sharp parabola that carried him far below the Ecliptic. In a matter of minutes he was watching the Mars-cruisers fade away into darkness. His present course would bring him far over into Mars' dark-side, but that was what he wanted anyway.

**H**OURS LATER the vast South Desert was rising up below him. Deimos had just appeared, climbing with slow majesty across the sky; Phobos would come a few hours later, pursuing its reckless course. Ketrik peered far ahead to the horizon. There, against the dark downward curve, he saw a faint glow that was not the glow of Deimos. He knew that must be the capital city, Turibek, untold miles away. He made swift calculation. To the right, then, would be the K'Mari Range. He knew those mountains. It

would be the very place to leave his ship.

He dropped lower and headed for there. The pale ghost-glow of Deimos didn't help much. He switched to infra-red, peered at the V-Panel as it lighted up and saw the unmistakable, serrated line of mountains about twenty miles away. He had judged it that close! Ketrik grinned proudly.

It was short-lived. A Martian voice sliced through the radio, shrill and commanding.

"Ground! You, below there—you will ground immediately or we blast!"

Then Ketrik realized that for the past several minutes there had been a faint humming sound from above and all about him, scarcely heard. He had relaxed in his vigilance, and the Martian 'copters had picked out his trail—those fast-powered and deadly scouting ships. They too must be equipped with infra-red!

Even as these thoughts raced through his mind, Ketrik was acting. He leaped away from the V-Panel, grabbed the Control and threw it over. Too late now! The ship responded, but sluggishly. The nose veered sharply upward, trying to leap away—then the entire hull shuddered. Power beams! It must be a vast concentration of them, to stop Frequency power! Slowly his forward progress was retarded. Relentlessly he was being forced down into the Martian sands. Again the voice sliced through.

"It is useless, outlaw! We've had you in our finder for the past five minutes and you are in a network of Power-beams. Nullify your control immediately or we blast!"

Ketrik cursed. Already his ship was straining at the seams. And now he felt insufferable heat all about him, realized they were using the beams. His stomach turned over as he thought of his rocket-tubes loaded with fuel. . . .

Quickly he entered the starboard lock; stood peering down. He was dropping fast. Above him now he saw hosts of vague shapes, heard the whine of Martian 'copter blades cutting the air. The metal under his fingers was growing hot. He counted to five, slowly . . . and leaped outward.

It may have been thirty feet—or fifty. Ketrik only knew that he was plummeting

downward. He let his muscles go limp, and just in time. He hit the sand hard, rolled over once and knew that no bones were broken. Above him he saw the pale glow of heat-beams, saw the hull of his spacer growing cherry-red . . . and suddenly realized his danger.

He staggered up, went ploughing across the desert, still mentally counting off the seconds . . . "eight . . . nine . . . ten . . ." The explosion lighted the sky for a hell-filled moment. Ketrik went hurling forward, to land head foremost into the sand. Parts of his ship came thudding down about him.

One fragment, red-hot, landed against his arm and burned it severely. Other fragments scattered over a wide area. Ketrik was cursing now, unconsciously using the mono-syllabic Martian in which he had versed himself.

Then it was all over. Ketrik was glad of only one thing. His ship was gone, but the Frequency Tuner had gone with it! The Martians would never get that priceless power unit. He rolled to his back and looked up.

It was not over! A few 'copters were descending to view the wreckage—or perhaps to look for him. Had they seen him jump? Powerful searchlights began criss-crossing the area. Again he staggered up, went forward into darkness. Every muscle ached, but his eyes were alert for the beams. Whenever one passed near him, he flattened into the sand. After untold agonies, he judged that he was fairly safe. Far behind, he heard the drift of excited Martian voices.

He didn't rest. He kept going away from those voices. They might still be looking for him. He was utterly confused in his direction now. He could be going toward Turibek, or toward K'Mari Range . . . or out into the vast wilderness to the south. One of those dark storms was sweeping up, and Deimos was hidden. Soon the sharp sand began to pelt him.

Ketrik turned up his collar and ploughed on. He remembered that those storms usually, but not always, came up from the south. He guided his direction by that, and plunged on.

"At least one thing's settled," he muttered after a while. "I'm relieved of the problem of hiding my ship!"

**T**HROUGH ADVENTURES on every far-flung world, every barren satellite, Ketrik's uncanny "time-awareness" had never failed him. It didn't now. He knew that it was precisely one hour and twenty minutes later when he saw the flickering lights, so he couldn't have come far. He saw the lights but once, quite a distance ahead and low against the ground. Then they were gone as the sand rose in renewed fury.

He moved cautiously now. He didn't see the lights again but knew he was going toward them. Ketrik was no stranger to this south desert. Now the old nameless awareness was with him. It may not have been anything he heard—but he suddenly knew that very close, just beyond the radius of his vision, unknown shapes moved through murky darkness. The very sands seemed to whisper the danger. But Ketrik heard other sounds now. The sounds he heard were sibilant footsteps and they were patient, very patient, as they kept pace with him.

He became suddenly motionless, held his ears attuned. The soft footsteps stopped, but not before Ketrik determined that they were on both sides of him now and probably behind him as well. He nodded grimly and went on, no longer trying to tread softly. He loosened the electro in his belt. These might be Rajecs or they might be the scavenger rats that trailed a man until he dropped. In either event . . .

He knew very soon. They came hurtling out of darkness at him, great black shapes, silent and swift. But they were man-size, which meant they were Rajecs. His electro was out, but he didn't get a chance to use it. A muscular hand seized his arm and bore it painfully backward. Other Rajecs crowded in. Even at this close range Ketrik could see little except their eyes, feral as flaming topaz.

Even Ketrik could not fight that which he could not see. But he tried, tried grimly until the weight of their bodies bore him down. He remembered that these people could see in darkness. They undoubtedly saw that he was "Martian," and his life would be forfeit unless. . . .

He was trying to remember something else, something out of Rajec legendry. A

single word. It came to him then, and he ceased fighting. He whispered the word fiercely.

"*S'Relah!*"

It was magic. The clutching hands loosened. He could feel the black muscular figures draw back, hesitant.

"You are Martian!" one of them hissed.

"But *S'Relah*, I tell you!" Ketrik spat the word. "I am one of you!"

They helped him to rise, but kept firm grip on his arms. "We will see. Come."

They went forward through darkness. Presently they were mounting a slight rise. From the top of it Ketrik looked down at the campfires of a Rajec caravan, a large one.

As they moved down the slope, Ketrik realized he'd have to stick to his word. His mind raced, building up a brief but, he hoped, suitable story. He was sufficiently versed in Martian history. He knew that aeons ago vast tribes of these black-skinned Rajecs had been dominant on the planet. But the "Upper Martians," so called, had progressed phenomenally. They were superior in the arts, social government, science, and the "culture" of warfare. They had swept down from the north, expanding, building their cities and developing their waterways, the now famous Canals. A bitter thousand-years' war had driven the Rajecs ever southward into the merciless deserts.

There they had stayed, waging periodic but futile warfare. Wild and tribal now, they still had never forgotten. The *S'Relah* was a fanatic, inter-tribal society . . . persisting through countless generations, dedicated to a relentless hate of those upper Martians. And Ketrik knew what few men knew—that among the *S'Relah* were many renegade Martians, outlaws and embittered "politicals" usually, working through the Society for personal gain or revenge.

KETRIK had his story ready as they came into the camp. The Rajec leader was sent for. This man was large, well proportioned, the muscles beneath his ebon skin high-lighted in the glow of the central fire. He was armed merely with a razor-edged dagger in a jewelled belt. Ketrik, looking at him, felt respect and a certain foreboding—the latter occasioned

by the slight enigmatic smile about the other's lips.

The man eyed Ketrik with equal interest. His keen gaze lingered overly long on his "Martian" features. He certainly noted the electro which Ketrik retained, but it didn't seem to bother him. He spoke at last, in Martian.

"You claim to be *S'Relah*. We will need proof of that. What is your name?"

"Khosan."

"Ah, yes. Khosan. And where do you come from?"

"L'Otli." Ketrik named a small mining camp far to the south. "Been prospecting there for six months, trying to make stake enough to get up to Turibek."

"Yes. We, too, go to Turibek. You knew that?"

Ketrik allowed puzzlement to show in his eyes. The other went on. "You seem surprised, Khosan. Had you not heard, then, that your emperor, Dar Vaajo, has signed a treaty with the consolidated tribes of Rajec?"

"I had not heard. And I believe you lie! The Rajecs would never make treaty!" Ketrik hoped his disbelief sounded convincing.

"It is true," the black shrugged. "But that does not matter. Your going to Turibek matters. A foolhardy thing to attempt alone!" The enigmatic smile still lingered. "But, then, being at L'Otli for so long, you were not aware of Dar Vaajo's scouts everywhere. This area has become thick with their 'copters—especially in the last few hours!" There was calculated meaning in the last words.

Ketrik decided on a bold stroke. He said calmly, "Yes. I am aware of it now. They blasted my plane out of the sky scarcely an hour ago. Perhaps you saw that?"

"We all have observed a slight display in the sky to the west. You know—Khosan—word reaches us swiftly and in many ways. It is rumored that Vaajo's scouts are seeking to apprehend one who *may* come here from Earth." The black paused, but Ketrik's eyes never flickered. "They may even search this area. They know our camp is here. There should be a reward of many Martian credits for capture of the one they seek!"

Ketrik shrugged. "That explains why

they fired at me. I guess they mistook me for that one."

The Rajec's smile vanished abruptly. His next questions came fast. "You are *S'Relah*? Why are you *S'Relah*?"

"Political. Irreconcilable. My father was a 'political' before me."

"Where do you go in Turibek?"

"Where the Street of the Double Moon makes juncture with the Low Canal is a tiny shop dealing in curios from the far planets. The proprietor is one Jal Thurlo. I go there for a meeting with him."

"And the reason? The reason—quickly!"

Ketrik's gaze leveled and he said slowly, "You would not expect me to tell you that. He too is a 'political'."

"You can quote the oath of the *S'Relah*?"

Ketrik had been waiting for that one. Now, in a low voice, he quoted the oath which not all Rajecs, very few Martians, and probably no Earthman save himself had ever heard. It was a strange and terrible oath, an oath hallowed in blood, and its implications would have made some men blanch. But Ketrik spoke it feelingly. He finished the words and looked closely at the black's face.

The man was satisfied and strangely moved, albeit slightly puzzled. He drew a tremulous breath at last.

"You have proven! You may go on to Turibek with us. We travel afoot and the way is slow, but certain."

"That is agreeable."

**T**HE LEADER drew Ketrik aside, out of hearing of the others. "At the rear of our caravan is a small group of Martians, prospectors from the nearby mountains—a ragged, harmless lot, whom we tolerate. I think it advisable that you travel with them. Dar Vaajo's *Specials* are stationed along our route."

Ketrik nodded curtly, started to move away. The Rajec stopped him. "This mining camp you mention, this L'Ottli where you have been for six months. Is it not far, far to the south, at the extreme end of the K'Mari Range?"

"That's the place." Ketrik was on his guard.

"I thought you would like to know there is no L'Ottli. That entire town was wiped out in a great avalanche three years ago.

Oh, yes, one more thing." The black was smiling now, looking at the place on Ketrik's arm where the hot chunk of metal had burned the sleeve away. "That is a bad burn, and a strange one—for a Martian."

Ketrik looked at his injured arm for the first time. Around the area of the burn was a tiny outline of white—the white skin of an Earthman showing through. Only the keen eyes of this Rajec would have noticed it.

"I'll give you other garments," the man said. "You had better burn these. Good night, and sleep well—Khosan."

But Ketrik didn't sleep well. He burned his garments and donned the others, then found the camp of the Martian prospectors. There were six of them, all asleep now. Ketrik found a place by the fire and lay awake, speculating.

The Rajec leader he trusted. The man was undoubtedly of the *S'Relah*. But these six Martians would be suspicious of him, a newcomer. If they hadn't yet heard of the search for a spy in the area, they would certainly hear of it on the morrow! And they'd report him to any of Dar Vaajo's "*Specials*" they met along the line of march.

That last thought gave Ketrik his answer, a temporary one at least.

At dawn the caravan moved. The six Martians were surprised at this newcomer, but not yet suspicious. Ketrik didn't give them time to be. From beneath his armpit he produced the thin disk which he'd taken from the slain Martian operative. He flashed it briefly, asked a few curt questions, and the men were properly cowed. Apparently they knew the power of Vaajo's *Specials*.

"Just routine," Ketrik told them. "I'll travel along with you for a while." Determined to play his role to the hilt, he added, "We can't be too careful in these times. There may be *S'Relah* among these damned Rajecs, but we'll find them out before we get to Turibek. Dar Vaajo has gone too far in his plans to have them thwarted now."

By tactful conversation he sought to learn something of what was going on at Turibek. It soon became apparent that these bedraggled men didn't know, and cared less. One of them had heard of Dar Vaajo coming to Turibek with a complete

staff of scientists, but that's as far as his knowledge went. Another of the men had heard of the treaty, and wasn't surprised.

"I've seen it coming," he said gruffly. "Many years I've lived in these deserts, and I tell you the Rajecs aren't the same. Especially the last few years. Something just seems to have gone out of them."

Something indeed had gone out of the Rajecs, if they made treaty! Ketrik wondered what kind of magic Dar Vaajo had used to bring that about. More particularly, *why*? There was some sort of link here, between the Rajecs and whatever was going on at Turibek. And that, in turn, was a pivot in Vaajo's larger plan, the plan that would deal with Earth. Ketrik just couldn't piece it together as yet; he'd have to get to Turibek. He thought fleetingly of those electronic walls . . .

The sun climbed higher, hot and dry, sapping the strength. Ketrik marvelled at the long line of marching Rajecs—there were perhaps two hundred. Long years in these deserts had inured them to discomfort. Again he wondered why they were going to Turibek. Almost he was tempted to go up and speak again with the Rajec leader—the man's name was Aarnto, he learned—but he thought better of it.

At high noon they stopped for rations, and a few hours later the Martian 'copters came over. They came from the direction of the city, circled once, and flew leisurely back. Ketrik wondered what that meant. He was soon to know.

**P**RESENTLY Aarnto dropped back, fell into step beside him and drew him away from the others. "You saw the 'copters?"

"Yes," Ketrik replied. "Trouble ahead?"

"For you, perhaps, O mysterious one from out of the desert! Those 'copters mean there is a surveying station ahead, and the Specials will be there. Apparently they are still searching for the spy."

"These surveying stations—what do they do there?"

"Oh, they are diabolic, these Specials of Vaajo's! They have machines which tear a man's mind apart, probe into his inner thoughts. No spy could ever get past them."

"Then how do you propose to get by, O grinning one?"

The black continued to grin. "True," he said frankly, "I am *S'Relah*. And there are several others among us. We shall get by the Specials all right, and into Turibek by the main gate. For the past year we have prepared for this, through systematic thought-control. We can submerge our true thoughts so that all the machines will read will be obeisance and loyalty."

"Seems ticklish," Ketrik said. "But I guess I'll try that too." He had no intention of trying it. He was watching Aarnto's reaction.

"Listen to me." Aarnto was serious, gripping Ketrik's arm. "You could never manage it. It takes months to perfect such mind control, and you have only hours. I do not know why you wish to get to Turibek, but you quoted the oath to me. I know of another way into the city for you—it will be perilous but not so perilous as trying to run the gauntlet of Specials!"

"I am listening, O helpful one."

"We will reach this station before sundown. If you should leave the caravan now, and cut across desert to the foothills, you would be safe. Once over there. . ."

Now it was Ketrik who grinned. "I know. Once over there, I might find the entrance to the ancient South Canal."

Aarnto was amazed. "You know of that too?"

"I've heard of it, but don't know the exact location."

Aarnto pointed to the K'Mari Range, indicating twin peaks that curled up like devil's horns. "Guide your course directly between those. The Canal ends somewhere in the foothills below."

"Thanks, Aarnto." Ketrik placed his hand on the man's shoulder, in the Rajec custom. "May I repay you some day!"

"That day may come soon," the other said calmly. "I can almost promise it."

Ketrik wondered what he meant by that, but wasted no more time on words. Turning abruptly, he set out across the desert. The six Martians watched him go. One of them, who had been silent and surly, frowned thoughtfully now as he stared after Ketrik's retreating figure.

Ketrik judged the hills to be fifteen miles away at this point. He'd be lucky if he

reached them before nightfall. After that well, there were tales about those abandoned Canals . . .

He directed his course between the curving peaks. In a few hours the ground began to rise slightly, became firmer underfoot. Still later, deep little gullies began crossing the terrain. He followed these, changing from one to the other, searching for some sign of the Canal.

After an interminable search, he was rewarded. He began to notice peculiarities of the gully in which he trod. It seemed to level out, and the walls seemed smoother and higher. He scraped away layers of sand, saw ancient stone.

By this time the sun had dropped below his vision. He knew that any minute the Martian night would come with awful suddenness. And with it, would come . . . other things.

But Ketrik was unprepared for what came in that moment. He heard a sudden sharp whirr of blades, and a 'copter appeared above him! It swept so low he could almost see the pilot. There was no doubt the pilot had seen him, for a heat-beam sliced downward, swept along the Canal floor. Ketrik leaped aside, hugged the sandy wall.

Then the 'copter was gone, but Ketrik knew it would circle and return. That could only mean one thing. The caravan had reached the Station, and one of those Martians had spoken of him to the Specials.

Ahead, through the gloom, the Canal seemed to dip into a sort of culvert. He raced for it as he heard the whirling blades again, entered the dark tunnel just as the heat-beam sprayed downward, sending the sand into molten froth. Ketrik groped forward in darkness. The tunnel leveled and continued. Ketrik's heart leaped as he realized where he was. This was one of the abandoned Canals which had been filled with slag from the Martian mines. But years ago pirates had conceived the unique idea of burrowing through it, making a perfect retreat from Turibek to the mountains!

**S**UDDENLY he started. Far behind he heard a scuffle of steps. That could only be the Martian Special! There was no doubt, now, that word had gone to Dar Vaajo; they really wanted to stop him!

Ketrik grinned and went on, harrying his steps a little. Rajects could see in the dark, but Martians couldn't. If it came to a showdown. . . .

His grin soon vanished. All about him now he heard vicious hoek animal squeals, the scuffling of tiny feet. Scavengers! There must be thousands of them. He saw their baleful red eyes. They gradually grew bolder, began nipping at him. Soon his trousers were in shreds from the knees down, and he felt the flow of blood.

There was one satisfaction. The Martian coming behind must be suffering the same treatment! But the man kept coming. The footsteps were dogged and Ketrik knew he had a real antagonist here.

Now the scavengers were becoming more than annoying. He knew that before he ever reached the city, he would weaken from loss of blood and they'd pull him down. He could use the electro to clear a path through the vicious beasts—but he knew the one coming behind was waiting for that, waiting for any sign of light that would give him a clear target. Ketrik gritted his teeth and went on, occasionally kicking out at the beasts in the dark. It didn't do much good.

Then, far ahead, he saw the faintest glow of light. It seemed to come from around a bend in the tunnel. If he could only get up there in time—and beyond that light, before his pursuer came into view . . .

He sprinted ahead now, noiselessly. The scavengers squealed in renewed fury, racing along beside him. Once he stumbled, felt a horrid mass of the things swarming. But he fought his way up. By the time he reached the light, he was sure he had gained a considerable distance on his pursuer.

He hurried around the bend, saw that the faint light came from a radium lamp in the ceiling. It had probably been there for years. But what held his attention, and brought him to a standstill, was the figure huddling against the wall.

It was an Earthman and he was still alive. His clothes were in shreds and the rats had been at him—before he reached this light where the rats did not come. He struggled up weakly, gazed at Ketrik out of idiotic eyes. Ketrik hurried forward, pulled the man erect.

One look into his gibbering face, and



Ketrik felt his stomach turn over in a prodigious yawn.

*It had taken more than the rats and darkness to do this! The Earthman's mind had been literally and deliberately blasted!*

Ketrik suddenly remembered what Mark had said of Dr. Ransome, whom they'd found drifting near the moon . . . his mind that of a week-old infant. . . .

He hurriedly searched the man's clothes, but found nothing. He knew this must be one of the operatives whom Mark had sent a month before—E-39 or EV-5. The other must be dead, somewhere in this tunnel or back at their communications base in the mountains.

He spoke softly to the man, but the other only cringed in terror. Then, with unexpected strength, he tore himself from Ketrik's grasp and was scuttling away, back around the bend of the corridor. Ketrik followed, called a warning. He reached the bend too late. He heard the hiss of a heat-gun and saw the vivid blue streak of it from out of the darkness—a streak that touched the man Earthman's chest and sent him crumpling.

Ketrik fired at the spot where the ray had appeared, fired instinctively but unerringly. He heard a soft moan that ended abruptly, then a clatter of sound.

He moved slowly forward, hugging the wall. He feared a trick. Past the little radius of light where the Earthman's body lay, he stumbled upon the Martian Special. He flashed his electro again and saw that the man was unmistakably dead. He went back to the Earthman, stared down for a moment. There was no doubt that he had unwittingly saved Ketrik's life.

"Guess you served your purpose here, after all," Ketrik murmured, but his thoughts at that moment were not as caloused as the words.

With a few strokes of his electro, he removed the crystyte globe of radium from the ceiling; and carrying this light, he was no longer bothered by the scavengers. For hours he proceeded along the tunnel. At last, infinitely weary and wracked with pain, he reached a blank wall.

Searching around it, he at last found a loose stone which he pulled away. A tiny metal lever was revealed. After tugging interminably at it and pounding the rust

away, Ketrik managed to pull it slowly back.

The entire wall swung around on pivots. A blast of foul air struck him. Ketrik stepped into a small passage. He recognized it as one of the underground sewers of Turibek. He followed it and came to a short flight of stone stairs leading up to a hinged door. Slowly he shoved it open.

He was in Turibek! This was one of the narrow, winding streets in the warehouse district. He glanced at the sky. It was night. Deimos was gone below the horizon, but Phobos rode high on liquid sapphire.

Ketrik rested there for a few hours until Phobos descended. Then, in the utterly dark hour that precedes dawn on Mars, he crept forth and sought the shop of one Jal Thurlo in the Street of the Double Moon.

#### IV.

HE FOUND the shop, in a twisting little street that seemed to cringe from the rest of the city. The insignia of Jal Thurlo was still upon the door, and Ketrik breathed a sigh of relief.

Finally, after his persistent knocking, the door opened a trifle and Ketrik saw the wizened little face of Jal Thurlo. The shop-keeper's eyes were dark with suspicion.

"I was told I would find one Jal Thurlo here," Ketrik said glibly. "I come with news of a secret shipment. Rare *kaladonis* furs from the plains of Io."

"At this ungodly hour?" Thurlo grumbled sleepily.

"It is the proper hour for such matters, thou sulky one! Permit me to enter now or I take my news elsewhere!"

Thurlo opened the door, and Ketrik slipped into a dark room that smelled of spices, perfumes, and a miscellany of objects from the far planets. He followed the little Martian through the shop and along a dim corridor, until they arrived at the living quarters. There, under brilliant light, Thurlo faced him. "Who sent you?"

Ketrik answered carefully. He knew this little man carried a needle-gun in his sleeve, and had used it on occasion. "No one. I merely seek haven here. I once saved your life on Deimos—you remember it?"

Thurio started visibly. "Ketrik! Is it really you? But no, it cannot be!"

"It's Ketrik, all right. But 'Khosan' for the time being. Remember this?" He bared one arm and revealed a long jagged scar from shoulder to elbow. He further proved his identity by recounting the adventure on Deimos many years ago, in which he'd received this scar while saving Thurio's life. "I must remind you of the Martian blood debt," he ended. "I saved your life and it is forfeit to me until you repay."

"I have not forgotten!" He looked at the other's torn and bleeding legs. "Come, man, let me dress those wounds! Then you can tell me why you are here."

Ketrik recounted part but not all. When he had finished, impressing upon Thurio the urgent need to get inside Dar Vaa'jo's laboratories, the little Martian shook his head.

"I fear it cannot be done. That part of the city is strictly forbidden. Vaa'jo's palace is there, and the homes of his scientists, all surrounded by the wall. Even the few servants who are permitted to pass in and out occasionally are painstakingly examined."

"I've got to get in there," Ketrik reiterated. "And I intend to!"

"Wish I could help you. It might be for the best! Dar Vaa'jo is becoming as hated as he is feared, yes even by his own people! Something monstrous and mad is going on in those laboratories!"

"What can you tell me about it?"

Thurio's eyes became dark, and his voice lowered. "Only this: Frequently, in the dark of night, a faint greenish glow comes over the city. It only lasts a few seconds, then withdraws into a pillar of concentrated fire directly over the laboratories! Then it seems to extend itself, lashing outward into space."

"Greenish fire!" Ketrik exclaimed. "Do you mean electronic power, Thurio?"

"No, not that at all. I'm no scientist, but I know this is *odd* *light*. It's different—devilish! You may laugh at me, Ketrik, but I will say it. These radiations seem alien to this world, to this universe; they seem almost—*alien*!"

But Ketrik did not laugh. He was remembering the mad survivor of a missing Earth spacer. He was remembering the

poor gibbering devil he had seen but recently in the tunnel. He thought of these and other things, and felt the hair at the back of his neck begin to rise.

"Why," Thurio was grumbling, "did Vaa'jo have to come here to conduct his devilish experiments? Why could he not have stayed in the northern capital?"

"Because here he is in close contact with the Rajeca," Ketrik said experimentally, and watched for the little Martian's reaction.

"Yes!" Thurio nodded. "I can tell you something about that, too. Under the treaty, the Rajeca are allowed access to Turibek or, if they wish, other cities to the north. Vaa'jo has even built a magnificent temple here, where they can carry on their own ritualistic worship. Well—I've seen those black caravans come into the city, quite a number of them in the past weeks. But one sees little of them afterwards! Of course they may be shunted farther north. . . ."

"No!" Ketrik smacked a fist into his palm. "No, Thurio, for some reason they are needed here! It's all a part of Vaa'jo's plan—I know it!"

"I care little about the Rajeca," Thurio shrugged. "It is well that they disappear."

Ketrik thought differently. He lay awake in the little cubicle to which Thurio assigned him, his mind too turbulent for sleep. The pattern, though still vague, was beginning to take shape. At least he had gained entrance to Turibek! Tomorrow he would make a short tour about the city, try to formulate a plan. At last his tired muscles relaxed, and he dropped into an untroubled sleep.

IT WAS HIGH NOON when Jal Thurio awakened him. The little Martian seemed strangely perturbed. "My friend, there is one at the alley entrance who asks for you!"

"For me?" Ketrik was up instantly and began dressing with deft, precise fingers. Who else would know that he had arrived in Turibek? But his mind was put at ease when he reached the rear entrance. Standing before him was the somewhat bedraggled but still grinning figure of Aarato, the caravan leader.

"Did I not say, Khosan, that the day would soon come when you could repay

me? I remembered well your mention of this shop!" And when Ketrik hesitated, he went on, "Well, O fugitive of the dark tunnels—am I not permitted entrance?"

"Come in—quickly!"

Aarnto waved a hand cheerily. "There is no need for alarm. I entered through the city gates as I said I would. The others have gone to the temple, but not I. I will need a place . . ."

Thurlo frowned. Ketrik said, "It's all right, Thurlo. Aarnto's a friend of mine. Please allow him to stay. I owe a debt too." He turned to Aarnto. "But listen! Don't draw the Specials here. I can't afford that!"

"I am caution itself, my friend! I too have a mission here. Perhaps one night's sanctuary is all I shall ask, and your debt is paid." The black still smiled—with all but his eyes. Behind them Ketrik detected a hardness and cunning, together with a warning not to ask questions.

Ketrik had no intention of doing that, but he made a resolution to watch this one. If their paths here should ever chance to cross, Aarnto would be a tough one indeed! Ketrik left him in Thurlo's capable but somewhat reluctant hands, while he prepared himself for his tour of the city.

From the Street of the Double Moon, he emerged into the broader thoroughfare. Turibek was the metropolis of the south, boasting of theatres, cafés and shopping centers, as well as a magnificent spaceport.

Ketrik gave but a glance to the overhead mono-cars, preferring to stroll leisurely. He found the people, the streets, and the queer facaded buildings much the same as he'd know them years ago.

There was one startling difference. At the end of this main thoroughfare a forbidding wall reared up, to extend out of sight in either direction. That was the wall around the laboratories. Ketrik could not possibly see what lay beyond.

He made his way slowly in that direction. Thurlo had furnished him with apparel that stamped him as a prosperous, somewhat foppish Martian, perhaps a mercantile buyer. He stopped once, listened to music blaring from a public Tele-system, but it contained nothing of consequence to him—no mention of Dar Vaajo or local events.

A few minutes later he entered a tiny shop dealing in rare spices and tobaccos. He purchased a vile but expensive Venusian cigar. He lighted and drew upon it with evident relish.

"Ah, we do not find these often in Roktol!" he said to the proprietor, naming a city far to the north. "Turibek has its advantages after all."

"You are a stranger here?"

"Yes, I have just arrived. I am a buyer for Varik's." He saw the man was impressed. "I find Turibek a fascinating city, but tell me—the high wall to the east of here—what is it? They would not allow me to pass!"

"And no wonder, sir. Those walls surround the palace grounds and laboratories of our Emperor!"

"To be sure! I should have known that." Ketrik smiled, and when he spoke again there was the slightest hint of mockery. "Ah, but you of Turibek should be flattered that our Emperor chose your city to carry on his noble experiments."

The man hesitated, glanced around, but decided to speak. "I think you know we are not fortunate, sir. What Dar Vaajo is doing may be for the best . . . but if only we were informed!"

Ketrik raised his brows in puzzlement, and the other went on, "Eh, then you do not know of it? But of course not—you have just arrived. Well, sir, it is to come again *tonight*—at two hours past the midnight. This morning's Tele-news warned all residents to stay in their homes at that hour—and we know what that means."

**K**ETRIK knew, too. The green radiance which Thurlo had spoken of. Tonight! He wanted to observe that display! Then he thought of the Rajecs, the caravan of two hundred which had just that day entered the city. His mind leaped. Was it mere coincidence, that upon this very day . . . ?

He said carelessly, "I have heard that more of those wretched Rajecs were permitted entrance this morning. It seems a stupid thing, this treaty which allows the outlanders to pollute our cities!"

"It would seem so, yes. But Dar Vaajo is cunning in his way. Perhaps the blacks are shipped north, to work the Uranium mines!"

Ketrik dared ask no more questions. He left the shop and continued his stroll toward the wall. When he came within a block of it he could see that it wasn't stone, as he had supposed. It was heavy mesh-drapery reaching twenty feet high, and still higher were the electronic control-towers. A touch of a button would throw any section of this wall into flaming, deadly radiance. Here was a formidable barrier! Ketrik frowned, looking at it—but he didn't dare linger there too long.

He turned back, was crossing the street when he heard a warning shout and then a claxon-blast. He leaped to the curb just as a vehicle swept by. It swerved sharply to avoid hitting him. Two others followed—they were the three-wheeled, electronic-powered cars native to Mars.

From the rear seat of the second car a girl's face peered out, a bit frightened at the near accident. A golden face, lovely, with copper-boned hair tumbling in waves to her shoulders, and eyes large and blue as arbutus.

This mesh Ketrik saw, before the cars were gone. He turned and stared. A section of the drapery wall slid upward and the cars passed through; all, except the last one. It turned sharply and came hurtling back to where Ketrik stood. A pompous Martian climbed out, strode singly up to him.

"You! Dok! The Princess Prana might have been injured! What are you doing here anyway, so near the grounds? Do you not know it is forbidden?"

The Princess Prana! Yes, now Ketrik remembered. Dax Vaajo had a daughter—she had completed her early education at one of Earth's best schools. That was all of ten years ago, but she had been a pretty child even then.

"Well! Answer me! Or shall I take you to the Guards for questions?"

Ketrik came out of his reverie and looked at this man. A high-servant at the palace, probably, judging from his manner. Ketrik bowed coldly.

"I was not aware of the restricted area. I am but newly arrived in Taribek, and have found your city most charming—until now." There was the correct amount of annoyance in his voice, plus a subtle warning. "You wish to see my credentials, sir?"

The other's manner changed. For the first time he seemed to notice Ketrik's dignified dress and manner. He hesitated.

"I don't suppose that will be necessary, sir. A thousand pardons for speaking so hastily, but our nerves have been on edge, you know, ever since the rumor that some of the *S'Relak* would attempt to enter the city."

"My dear man! I am sure our Emperor's splendid Guard can deal capably with these *S'Relak*! I will bid you good day now; I have yet to visit your charming shops." Ketrik turned haughtily, began his stroll back to the main avenues. He felt the Martian's puzzled gaze upon him, but did not look back.

He did not look back until ten minutes later, when he had the eerie sensation of being followed. He spotted the man at once, undoubtedly a Special—tall, cold-eyed, a bit too leisurely of manner. Ketrik smiled grimly, and entered a shop. The man followed. Ketrik came out, and the Special was just the correct distance behind.

At the next leading platform Ketrik purchased a ticket, waited until one of the moon-cars dropped down from the single overhead track. He entered the car, walked the length of it and exited on the opposite side. He hurried across an area-way and lost himself in the crowd waiting for the opposite-bound car which just then came into view. The simple ruse worked. He boarded this car and there was no sign of his pursuer.

Dusk was fast coming upon the city when he again made his way to Thorlo's shop. His mind still wrestled with the problem of the electronic wall, and how to get beyond it. He immediately discarded the idea of an aero-copter in the dead of night; there would surely be detector rays. Here was a problem that called for planning, and patience.

And something else vaguely bothered him. A vision intruded upon his thoughts, annoying but persistent—the vision of a girl's face, lovely and golden . . .

## V

HE ENTERED the shop, and was startled to see a Rajec emerge from behind a counter piled high with silks and

fineries. The black was tall, elderly, a bit stooped, with a nervous twitch at the side of his face.

"Ah, sir, welcome to the humble shop of Thurlo. May I assist you in a selection? Some of these rare laces from Io, perhaps—or these exquisite candelabra? Over a thousand years old, sir, yet they have found their mysterious way here from the Deimian Temple of the Ancients."

Ketrik smiled a little, picked up the candelabra and set it down. "A fake. And so are you, Aarnto. I recognize you now."

"But not at first," Aarnto grinned. "I think my disguise will do. Not as thorough as yours, of course," he added.

"Where is Jal Thurlo?"

"Back there preparing the evening meal." Aarnto's finely chiselled nose wrinkled appreciatively. "And a welcome repast it will be, after our miserable desert fare!"

Thurlo had not spared his talents, and the meal proved to be excellent. Ketrik ate appreciatively but in silence. Thurlo hardly touched the food, seemed perturbed over something. Only Aarnto was his old self—more than that! His crisp manner, which Ketrik had noticed earlier in the day, was gone; he now seemed happy and almost jovial, as he kept up a running conversation. He told of haggling with one of the customers over a set of Venusian tapestries, finally getting twice the expected price.

"And look at this," he held to the light a crystalline jar that adorned the table. "Would you look at it, Khosan? *Vanadol*, the nectar of the Gods! An ancient vintage, too! I found it hidden away, far back on one of the dark shelves. I am sure," he smiled slyly, "that our host can obtain more where it came from, so let us drink to this occasion." He poured the blue liquor into their cups. "Yes, Khosan, an occasion—that too such as you and I should find our way here!"

Ketrik smiled, barely touched the stinging liquor to his lips.

When they had finished the repast, Aarnto rose and excused himself, but stood a moment hesitant. "I must leave you now, and I may have no occasion to return here. I wish to thank you, Thurlo, for you have been most gracious. And you—Khosan. We have been helpful to each other?"

"Yes, Aarnto. You more than I."

"Then the debt is paid." With that, the black was gone, out into the night which swallowed him up.

Thurlo sighed. "I hope he never returns. I do not like that one! If he is caught, and it becomes known I harbored one of the *S'Relah* here, even for a day . . . I only did it for you, Ketrik."

"You needn't worry. He's a clever one. But I wish I knew what they were up to!"

"They'll fry on Dar Vaajo's torture plates," Thurlo prophesied.

Ketrik thought of his own fate if he were caught, but quickly put it out of mind. "What do you think they're up to, Thurlo?"

The little Martian spoke slowly. "The *S'Relah*? They are apart from other Rajecs. Treaties mean nothing to those fanatics. They wish to strike at Dar Vaajo, and"—he hesitated—"what better way to do it than through his daughter?"

THE PRINCESS PRAANA! Of course that was it! A bold stroke, but just such a one as the Society of *S'Relah* would attempt. Ketrik realized now that some such thought had been hammering at his mind all the afternoon. He said eagerly, "Tell me about her, Thurlo. I caught a glimpse of her this afternoon."

"You did? Yes, she visits the shops occasionally, always accompanied by a bodyguard. The Palace Guard has been doubled too, since these rumors of the *S'Relah*. I'll wager her father would be furious if he knew she had left the grounds this afternoon! But that girl has a mind and temper of her own—so I have heard."

"Has she been here long?"

"No, she flew down from the northern capital only a few weeks ago. That was against Vaajo's orders, too. I think he'll be sending her back soon."

Ketrik remained thoughtful. He failed to see how Aarnto and the others hoped to reach her! For a Martian to get beyond those walls would be a ticklish problem; for a Rajec, it would be impossible! He heard Thurlo again.

"That's why I'm worried, Ketrik. Attention is being drawn to my shop. This afternoon an elderly matron came in—I recognized her, she's been here before, one

of the Princess Praana's personal servants—"

"Go on!" Ketrik was listening now.

"Well, Aarnto was in the front of the shop. He sold her some Ionian laces, then I saw him speak to her in an undertone and hand her a folded note. He doesn't know I saw him. I don't like it, Ketrik. I—"

"A note!" Ketrik's mind was racing with the speed of atomotors. "To be delivered to the Princess, no doubt! Here, to tell me—does Praana ever come here?"

"She would never deign to set foot in this humble part of the city. But she has undoubtedly heard of my shop . . ."

"That's it, Thurlo. I think I see their plan now. If you will promise to retire early tonight, I can guarantee that no word of this will reach the Emperor's ears."

Thurlo would have promised anything. An hour later all lights were out, and Ketrik stood in the darkened front of the shop where he could see the street but remain unseen. If his surmise was correct, he could thwart the plans of the *S'Relah*. Ordinarily he wouldn't have bothered, but now he thought he could turn it to his own advantage.

The hours passed. He watched the slow climb of Deimos across the sky. Its light scarcely touched this cringing little street. Once he saw the dull lights of a freighter descending, and remembered that just beyond this district was the freighter spaceport. Occasionally a skulking figure passed, keeping to the shadows. Once the flash of a heat-pistol came from a nearby alley, and a moment later the sound of running feet.

Still he waited. He lit a cigarette, keeping the glow of it carefully hidden. He began to wonder if the Princess would venture into this place after all. It seemed most unlikely, at this hour! It had been a crazy idea to begin with. He was clutching at straws. That note which Aarnto slipped to the servant might have meant something else entirely.

Ketrik dropped the cigarette, ground it savagely underfoot. Then, with a sharp intake of breath he leaned forward, peering through the window. From the near-by corner a dark vehicle had glided into the street! It moved swiftly and silently. It

could only be one of the three-wheeled cars.

It stopped across the street from the shop of Thurlo. For a minute no one emerged, and Ketrik knew the occupants were surveying the shop. He drew back a little. Then two figures stepped out, started across the street. One was a woman. Her steps were unhesitant, even a bit excited. Ketrik recognized the Princess Praana even from here. The other was a man, who seemed to be remonstrating with her.

"The fool! The little fool," Ketrik muttered. "But at least, she had sense enough to bring one of the Guard!"

EVENTS happened then with blurring swiftness. The shadows came from somewhere out of darkness, seemed to glide toward the pair in the street. In a split second they were upon Praana and the man. Too late the Guard sensed the danger; he whirled, but in the same instant was sinking to the street with a Rajec dagger through his heart. The other Rajec had clapped a hand roughly over the girl's mouth, was dragging her back to the car.

In those few seconds Ketrik was tugging at the shop door. It seemed to stick. He cursed, wrenched it open and flung himself into the street. His gun was out but he saw it was too late; Praana and the two assailants were already in the car, the motor was whining to life. Ketrik reached the car in two bounds, just as it hurtled away. He flung himself blindly at it. His hands managed to grip the rear wheel-guard. He clung to it, arms wrenching painfully as he was dragged along.

The car slowed, turning into the nearby street, and Ketrik managed to get his feet up. There he crouched precariously, leaning his weight forward as the car jolted through rough streets and alleyways. Again he cursed. He'd lost his gun back there! He didn't think they'd seen him, though; Praana had fought like a wild *hella*.

They apparently had her under control now, probably had administered a drug. Ketrik began to take notice of their direction. They were deep in the dark warehouse district. Suddenly his heart leaped. He knew where they were going! They intended to get Praana out of the city through that secret Canal-tunnel! He

doubted if there were a dozen men in this city who knew of its existence, much less its location.

Then they reached it. Ketrik recognized the place, knew he'd have to act quickly. One of the Rajecs had gotten out, was leaning over, trying to lift the girl's limp figure down from the seat. Ketrik stole forward. He put all his weight behind the blow which landed at the side of the man's neck; it was a dirty blow but this was no time for niceties. The Rajec crumpled, slid forward against the car.

"What's the matter, Vronu?" The other was Aarnto; Ketrik recognized his voice. Aarnto came around the front of the car then, and took in the scene.

Ketrik was tense. But Aarnto didn't move or speak. Not for several seconds. Then he said, slowly, "So. It is you again, Earthman." He was calling the terms correctly now. "I thought I had seen the last of you."

Ketrik glanced at Praana's unconscious figure upon the seat. His eyes flicked back to Aarnto. "My debt is paid, Aarnto! You said it yourself." With that, his limbs uncoiled and he hurled himself forward.

Aarnto met his rush, sending out a straight jab as he allowed his body to sway aside. The blow was glancing but powerful enough to send Ketrik off balance. Ketrik's lips went tight as he whirled back to the attack. He knew he had his work cut out for him here.

Aarnto seemed slim, but there was weight there and he knew how to use it. He put it behind every blow. For a few seconds Ketrik found himself parrying these blows, ducking and rolling and taking a few on the arms which numbed him. He managed to get a few past Aarnto's guard, but the Rajec took them too, and pressed his advantage. Ketrik was satisfied to back away for the moment. His legs were still a little numb from crouching on the car.

A crashing right came through Ketrik's guard, drawing blood from his mouth. He countered and missed, as the other leaped away. Again and yet again this happened, with Ketrik missing almost clumsily; they fought in near darkness and it was hard to connect with that swift moving black body!

"So you would interfere, O crudely disguised one!" Again Aarnto's fist came through, to send Ketrik reeling back. But his legs were less numb now, and he began to co-ordinate his footwork. His brain was lightning clear. Aarnto laughed contemptuously, laughed with the joy of battle and pressed forward, throwing more lefts and rights. They missed as Ketrik danced away lightly as a *hella* cat—then Ketrik threw a boxer's left, long and weaving, that found its mark.

"That better, O haunter of dark places?" He followed it with a right that crashed against bone, and Aarnto didn't laugh again.

Slowly Ketrik took the initiative, refusing to give way now and throwing his long left to advantage. He used the other's feral eyes as a focal point, aiming just below them. He sensed that the other was weakening. Aarnto gave ground slowly, fighting back. His blows were still heavy but now his timing was off and Ketrik didn't give him a chance to regain it. Ketrik's own arms were becoming numb, from stopping the other's blows. He shifted the attack to the stomach and Aarnto's guard dropped. A right came up that sent the Rajec staggering. Ketrik leaped in for the kill, lashed with a left that sent the black spinning half around.

The right-cross that followed immediately, was the one that did it. It caught Aarnto at the point of the jaw just below his ear. By the way he crumpled, Ketrik knew he wouldn't get up for some time.

Ketrik stood there for a moment looking down. A roaring was in his ears, a vast tiredness came upon him. He wiped blood from his face and looked at his bruised fists.

A sound came from behind him. He whirled.

**I**T WAS PRAANA. She stood there, looking small but somehow not frightened, staring at Aarnto's prone figure. She reached into her tunic and drew out a small electro. Before Ketrik could realize her intention, she aimed it at Aarnto.

He snatched the gum away just in time, "You'd kill him in cold blood?"

"He's a Rajec. And a member of the *S'Relah*!"

"Oh, you realize that now, do you? Well,



listen to me. He fought fairly—had a dagger there in his belt, and could have used it. So he gets a break."

She turned an angry face to him, started to speak, but he stopped her with a gesture. "Quiet! Listen!"

FROM somewhere near came the sound of scuffling feet. Ketrik moved swiftly to a little metal door between two buildings. This was the door to the sewer, which in turn led into the secret tunnel. Presently it opened, and Ketrik saw the yellowish glow of eyes. Rajec eyes, many of them—perhaps eight or ten. Ketrik stepped back. He gave a burst with the electro, allowed the beam to cut a frothing path very near the doorway. The black figures drew back.

"You get these two, and that's all!" He indicated Aarnto and Vronu. "Two of you step forward and get them. Quickly, now!" He gestured meaningfully with the weapon.

Two of the Rajecs crept out, watching him all the while. They seized the limp figures and dragged them back. Ketrik followed. "All the way! Clear back into the tunnel. I'm letting you off easy. Be glad you don't get Vaajo's torture plates for this night's work!"

He herded them all into the tunnel, then swung the pivoted door shut. A steady play of the electro-beam fused the mechanism so that it wouldn't work again, ever. He knew they might use their knives, loosen the stone blocks enough to gain another entrance, but he didn't care about that now.

He hurried back to the street, found Praana still waiting. Her fists were clinched and her voice sharp. "You take a lot upon yourself! Those were the *S'Relah* and should be turned over to the Guard!"

Not a word of thanks, no show of gratitude. Ketrik let his own voice rasp. "It isn't important. You were a little fool to leave the Palace! Why did you do it?"

"Then you know I am the Princess Praana! And you—you dare to speak to me like that!" She raised her fists, seemed about to strike him—then a thought occurred. "Rilon—he—where is he? What happened?" Then she shuddered, as though suddenly remembering.

"I suppose you mean your Guard," Ketrik said with no attempt to spare her feelings. "He's lying back in the Street of the Double Moon with a dagger through his heart, thanks to you."

"Thanks to me," she whispered, all the spirit gone out of her now. "I shall never forgive myself! He warned me, tried to stop me, even pleaded—and when I threatened to come alone . . ."

Ketrik said sternly "Why should you want to come at all—to this miserable part of the city?"

"You are right, I was a fool. Occasionally I send a servant to the shop of one Jal Thurlo, to pick up a rare article that would never find its way to Mars by the ordinary routes—you understand? This afternoon my servant brought me exciting news. In his shop Jal Thurlo had a single bottle of the perfume from the Deimian Temple of the Ancients! Can you understand what that means? That rare, that glorious perfume . . ."

Yes, Ketrik could understand. He smiled at Aarnto's cunning. Women would give their money, their jewels, everything they held precious, for a single dram of that perfume which was so rare as to be almost non-existent.

"But," Praana went on, "it was to be smuggled away from Mars tonight! It was to go to the Princess Aladdian on Venus! The note said that if I were to see Jal Thurlo tonight, I might persuade him—"

Ketrik felt suddenly sorry for her. She was almost in tears. "It was a trick of the *S'Relah*," he said, "and Jal Thurlo knew nothing of it. As for the Deimian perfume—my dear girl! I happen to know that the last of it was smuggled to Earth some years ago, and sold for a fabulous price." Ketrik neglected to mention that he himself had engineered the feat.

She smiled wistfully. "You have saved my life, and I have learned a great lesson. I owe you for both." She suddenly removed a bracelet of Martian diamonds. Ketrik waved it away, and she frowned in puzzlement. "Is it not enough?"

It was not nearly enough. What he wanted was to get beyond the electronic wall. He came near to hinting at it, but checked himself. No need to press his luck too far.

He bowed elegantly. "To have been of service to you, Princess, is reward enough in itself."

She was impressed, insisted on knowing his name and where he could be reached. He gave her the information with seeming reluctance. She assured him she could make her way back to the palace alone. "You shall be rewarded, nevertheless," were the last words Ketrík heard as she drove the car away. And he smiled inwardly.

HE WAS JUBILANT, retracing his route through the dark streets. Dar Vaajo would certainly send for him tomorrow! For he knew that Praana would tell her father of this.

It was just past the midnight hour, and suddenly he remembered something. This was the hour . . . but even as the thought crossed his mind, the phenomenon came. It came as a greenish glow rising above the city center, spreading swiftly outward. As it spread, like a blanket of palely pulsing light, a frightening *malignancy* came with it.

Then it touched upon Ketrík, and he reeled. The cold light was all about him, surging through him. Tightening tendrils of it clutched at his brain. A vast singing was in his ears. He fought back, fought as his mind reeled upon a chaos of vertiginous horror! Those light-tendrils tearing at his brain, eagerly, hungrily—here was Dar Vaajo's weapon and he knew it, even as he fell to the street to lie exhausted, his mind going away . . .

Still he tried to fight, knowing it was hopeless. An agony was in him, tearing at his fingertips and through every muscle; wrenching at his brain, seeking to tear it apart fiber by fiber. He felt his sanity going; it was being *drained* away as liquid is sucked through a straw. He laughed once, wildly. He felt other light-tendrils seeking, seeking hungrily all about him. With a last vestige of mental power he remembered again a gibbering madman in a dark tunnel . . .

Then the light was going away. It receded, rushing back upon itself, coalescing into a mass of greenish radiance that swirled and twisted angrily and tried to escape. Almost *alive*! As Jal Thurlo had said! Ketrík rose and stood swaying, his

head throbbing, as he watched it from afar.

Now the spherical mass of it, deeper in hue and pulsing angrily, hovered in the sky just above Vaajo's laboratories. Suddenly the sphere extended, became a pillar of pulsing light trying to leap away.

And it leaped away. Faster than light, swift as thought, hurtling through the outer reaches of space.

Ketrík didn't stay to see more. He didn't need to. Even through the cold needle-fires in his brain, he had enough faculty left to know that far out in space, in that part of the heavens, swam the planet Earth. Again this night Dar Vaajo was testing . . . testing the power of his curiously-alive weapon . . .

Ketrík reached the shop of Jal Thurlo, found the jar of *vanadol* and downed enough of it to put him into merciful oblivion.

## VI

IT WAS LATE the following day when a car, bearing the royal insignia, drew up before the shop and one of the Guards asked for "Khosan."

Ketrík was ready. He'd been waiting for this. As they drove toward the palace grounds the two Guards looked at him enviously.

"You have won great favor with the Emperor for last night's work," one of them said. "He wants personal audience with you! It would not surprise me if he made you Captain of Praana's own guard!"

"It is true you were not supposed to be on the streets at that hour," said the other. "But Dar Vaajo will overlook that, considering the circumstances."

Ketrík remembered that Praana was not supposed to be on the streets either, but he didn't voice the thought. They reached the electronic wall. One of the men gave the signal, and a section of it moved upward. Their car passed through.

At last he was inside the forbidden grounds! Ketrík remained outwardly humble, but he kept his eyes open. They went along a sweeping drive bordered by stately *majagua* trees. They passed a few buildings, fronted by splendid lawns. Then the palace itself loomed ahead, a magnificent

two-storied structure of dark *culchite* marble.

But Ketric had no eyes for it. To the left was a building equally imposing, and covering more area, which could only be the royal laboratories! It was undoubtedly from that building that the phenomenon had come the night before. He noticed the roof in particular, glass-covered, curving into a shallow dome. If Dar Vaajo favored him, he could get a position in there . . .

Then they were past the building and approaching the palace. The audio-tube near the driver's head crackled to life, and a voice came through. Ketric couldn't hear the words. A startled look appeared on the Guard's face. "Are you sure?" he said. "My orders were—"

"These are new orders! Obey them!" Ketric heard those words all right. The audio went dead. The driver wheeled the car around abruptly, headed away from the palace.

"Something wrong?" Ketric asked.

"Plans have been changed. Dar Vaajo doesn't want to see you quite yet." The man's voice was grim.

Ketric felt a sudden foreboding. "Where are you taking me, then?"

No answer. Ketric glanced at the Guard sitting next to him. This man had gone grim too, as his hand rested lightly on the electro beneath his tunic. Ketric couldn't guess what had gone wrong or why, but he knew he wasn't going to see Dar Vaajo under favorable circumstances. He went tight inside.

They stopped before a low stone building. The driver came around, opened the car door. "Out!" he ordered curtly.

Ketric came out. He launched himself bodily, his fist smashing to the other's face and making a bloody smear of it. The man staggered back. The momentum carried Ketric out of the car and to his knees. He heard the rush of the other Guard, whirled to meet it. Too late. He only saw the dark blur of the man's arm coming down in a swift arc, then heavy metal crashed behind his ear, leaving him stunned.

His muscles wouldn't pull him up. The blows came again . . . more than once, heavy and accurate. He ploughed forward onto cold pavement as his mind blanked out.

HE CAME again to consciousness, groaned as heavy pain hammered through his skull. Gradually his eyes focussed upon the details of the room. There weren't many details. It was a small room, quite bare. The floor was stone but the walls seemed to be of thick *crystyte*. Dim lights filtered through. There was no entrance of any kind that he could see.

"So you are awake at last, Earthman. And none the worse for wear." The voice came from within the room. Ketric raised his head, stared at the opposite wall, a section of which had taken on the silvery radiance of a tele-vise.

Imaged there were the features of Dar Vaajo. Ketric recognized him immediately.

It was an elderly face, but smooth—with the color and toughness and texture of old leather. The lips were tight and purposeful, the cheek-bones bulged beneath crisp, graying hair. And the eyes . . . they held Ketric. They weren't old eyes. They were hard and bright as jewels. An indomitable light came up from the dark depths of them.

Dar Vaajo spoke again from the screen.

"As you see, I prefer to hold audience with you in this manner. You are a dangerous man. Yes, very dangerous, to have come so far. Through my Space Patrol. Past my Specials. Into the city and past the inner wall itself." The lips quirked a little. "Yes, I have determined everything about you. Your name is not Khosan, but George Ketric—I have heard something of your exploits in the past. You are the spy sent here by the Earth Councillor, Mark Travers." Again he paused. "You are not surprised that I know all this?"

If he was surprised, Ketric didn't show it in the slight shrug he gave. He knew the voice would go on.

"I have learned this," Vaajo said, "within the past few hours. You see—we, too, have a development of the Scannar Beam. This beam was trained upon you from the very moment you drove into the palace grounds. We learned your true identity and purpose."

Ketric went dry inside. It would have to be that, the one thing he couldn't have foreseen! He spoke to the screen. "Very well, so I have lost. I suppose I can expect no reward for saving the Princess."

Something showed in the dark depths of Vaajo's eyes. Amusement? But he spoke thoughtfully. "Very well, you shall have your reward. I think I will send you back to Mark Travers—in a most unique way!"

Quite suddenly then, Ketrik knew. He knew the reason for the beam he had seen launched into space, and almost he grasped the principle of it. He felt his insides twisting up into cold, hard knots. But he managed to say, "You mean—that just a part of me will go."

Vaajo chuckled. "So. You saw last night's display, felt a taste of it perhaps, and you have guessed. Yes, your surmise is correct! We utilize the Rajec caravans. Two hundred yesterday, and fine specimens they were! But they are now mere walking hulks, devoid of all but the most meager mental impulses. Their bodies will be sent north to work the Uranium pits. Their minds have already been absorbed into my—shall we say, weapon, increasing its potential considerably."

Ketrik's brain seemed to twist inside his skull, until he could not tell whether he felt horror or fury or both. He only knew he must keep control, learn more of this grisly thing that Vaajo was conducting with human minds . . . He found his own voice, hard and dry, saying, "Yes, I saw it last night, felt it . . . but still I cannot understand . . ." He passed a hand across his forehead in seeming bewilderment. He heard Vaajo saying, "It cannot matter now, for my beam reached Earth last night . . . yes, it would please me to tell you something of it! You must have heard of the ancient city of M'Tonak, lying far beneath Mars' Polar Cap. And the sentient thought-force that came from outer space, or another dimension—no one ever knew—to land at M'Tonak where it remained for untold centuries. Through all that time the Entity remained barely alive, unknown to man, sustaining itself by sending out invisible radiations that fed on Martian minds! And you must have heard of the Earthman, Jim Landor, who found his way there and destroyed the Entity, leaving it crushed beneath tons of ice. All this was before your time or mine. Over a hundred years ago . . ."\*

Ketrik nodded. He had heard the story many times.

DAR VAAJO went on. "The story of the thought-entity beneath our ice cap had always intrigued me," he said. "So several years ago I sent some workmen to uncover that ancient city. Yes, you have guessed. The Entity hadn't died! It remained there insentient but alive, frozen into suspended animation beneath miles of ice! It was then that I remembered the stories of its power, its insatiable appetite for the mental forces of man . . . and thereupon I evolved my scheme. It has been dangerous, Ketrik, but I worked slowly and carefully.

"The first step was to waken it, which was easy. The second step was to keep it under control—not so easy. But I managed this by means of Uranium rays which seems to be the only thing capable of combating the Entity's own peculiar atomic structure. That was the reason for my Uranium embargo; I've had to increase the potential of these controlling rays as the Entity grew in size and power."

"You mean you . . . fed it? Allowed it to grow?" Ketrik was aghast, listening to this cold-blooded recital.

"Of course! How else was I to reach Earth with it, across miles of space? That was my ultimate goal."

"But how? It must have taken a tremendous . . . surely the Rajecs were not enough?"

Vaajo smiled blandly from the screen. "I told you I worked slowly. I began by communicating with it, telepathically. Yes! It's a highly intelligent entity, and it wishes to remain alive. It seems it came originally from a world in another dimension bordering on ours! It was the creation of a scientist on that world. The Entity became dangerous, threatened to get out of control, and could not be destroyed. The scientists rigged up a contra-dimensional device which hurled it out of that dimension. It landed quite by chance in ours—on Mars, near M'Tonak.

"So we made a sort of pact, the Entity and I. I wished it to grow in size and potential, but not at the sacrifice of my own people. I told it something of my plans. It, in turn, told me how to build a contra-dimensional machine by which to project it back into its own world! I managed this at last, adding a reverse control by which I could always bring it back.

\* *City of the Living Flame*, Planet Stories, Fall, 1942.

"Fully a dozen times now it has crossed the dimensions. Whenever I brought it back, it had . . . *fed*. You understand? It was satiating itself upon the populace of that other world! Until finally, it revealed to me that . . . there was no more. The other-dimensional world was barren of sustenance!

"By this time, however, I was almost ready. It had grown tremendously in size and power. I always added more rays to keep it under control. Then I began testing for Earth, allowing it to reach out. Have you realized what a terrible weapon concentrated and projected thought can be? Several times it touched Earth spacers, absorbed the minds aboard them, and" Dar Vaajo shrugged—"I had to send my Patrollers out afterwards to destroy the spacers. But never were we quite able to reach Earth! It would take more potential, just a little more, and where was I to find it? Then I thought of the Rajecs. I made treaty with them, built the temple here to attract them . . . I guess you know the rest."

Ketrik knew the rest, and more. He knew that Earth would have to capitulate to Vaajo's demands, or face destruction by a mind-destroying, mind-feeding Entity now capable of reaching across space. Venus would undoubtedly be next, leaving Dar Vaajo in control of the inner planets including the colonies recently established on Jupiter's moons.

"So, Ketrik, I shall send you back to Mark Travers," Dar Vaajo was saying. "Four days from now the orbits of our two planets reach their nearest juxtaposition. *Then* is when the Entity shall reach out again for Earth, to give another sample of my power." Vaajo smiled maddeningly just before he caused the screen to blank out. "And isn't it ironic that you, or rather the mental part of you, shall be an infinitesimal part of it!"

## VII

IT SEEMED hours later when Ketrik awoke. He had tried in vain to find a way out of the smooth, *crystyte*-walled room. He had sought to loosen one of the heavy stones in the floor until, with bleeding and broken-nailed fingers, he had fallen into a sleep of sheer exhaustion.

Now, in the exact center of the room, he noticed a platter of food. He frowned, until it dawned on him that it must have been lowered from the ceiling! He glanced up, but if the entrance was there, it was tightly closed now.

He ate the palatable food, but noticed the platter was of light plastex, could not possibly be used as a weapon or anything else. He made another search through his clothes, knowing it was useless. But suddenly he remembered the tiny scanner disc which Mark had given him. He had strapped it tightly to the underside of his arm . . . and it was still there!

He could think of no use for it now, however. He was still pondering this, when his attuned ears caught a faint sound of footsteps overhead. A moment later a section of the ceiling slid back. Framed in the square of light Ketrik saw a face . . . golden, a bit frightened.

Praana! Ketrik's heart leaped.

"Speak softly," she whispered. "You are in a room directly beneath the main palace. Father has gone for the moment, and I took this chance . . ."

"Why are you here?"

She spoke quickly. "A few hours ago I tuned my televiser into this one. I heard everything he told you! It's horrible, what he is doing—unbelievable! I hadn't known before! I knew he was conducting some sort of experiment . . . but this . . ." The shock of it, even disbelief, was still mirrored on her face.

"Praana, listen to me! Doesn't your father have an *Ethero-Magnum* here, capable of reaching Earth?"

"Yes, in his own private quarters." She was puzzled.

"You must get to it! Tune it into the Earth beam, then give me a channel from this tele-vise here, into that beam. If I can reach Mark Travers, I'll have him send the Earth Fleet!"

He saw her hesitate. She knew that Mars' patrollers could not stand against Earth's mighty armada. She was visioning the holocaust, the destruction of Martian cities and her own people. Ketrik went on quickly.

"Praana, you've been to Earth! You spent most of your girlhood there, and you must remember it still, have a fondness for it! The green forests and wide lakes,

the mountains, the unreal clouds in a blue sky—and the people who treated you kindly! All this will go, unless you act. Surely—”

“Mars is my world,” she was murmuring. “My own people . . . to consign them to another horrible war! Mars would never recover.”

“It will not come to that! If Earth takes the initiative, sends its Fleet in a surprise attack—the display of power will be enough. Dar Vaajo will be helpless in the face of it.” Ketrik was not at all sure this would be the case, but here was his only chance. “Quickly . . . we haven’t much time!”

Praana was wavering. “You saved my life,” she whispered. “Yes, I will try!” She tossed an electro-gun down to him, her own gun. Then she was gone, as the ceiling door went shut.

Ketrik waited, facing the wall which he knew was the tele-vise. Minutes passed, seemed to lengthen interminably. If he couldn’t get through to Mark . . . if Praana failed to gain access to the Ethero-Magnum, that was his last hope . . . He wondered if she knew how to operate it!

Suddenly a pale glow came across the wall, wavered for a moment and then deepened. He was looking into a luxurious room which must be somewhere in the palace above him. At the far end he saw the magnificent Ethero-Magnum, with Praana standing before it manipulating the controls. He heard the ascending whine as selenic cells poured power into the beam, then minutes passed as it gained full strength. At last a voice came through faint and clear! Mark Travers’ voice saying cautiously, “Go ahead, go ahead! You’re on Earth beam.”

“Ketrik speaking! Mark, listen carefully now and act fast! Mass the Earth Fleet, get it to Mars. Blast the city of Turibek clear off the planet if you have to! Things—”

“The Fleet,” Mark cut in, “is already on its way, in full battle formation! Something happened here about thirty hours ago that I suspect is Vaajo’s work! Touched an area just south of Kansas City. It’s horrible! Everyone within that area—”

“Spare me the details, I know them anyway. Dar Vaajo plans to give you

another taste in three days, on what I think will be a vastly wider scale! After that, he’ll probably give his ultimatum.”

“What is it he’s got there?” Mark’s voice was harried. “And where are you—”

“No time to tell you now! You wouldn’t believe me anyway, and there’s no defense against it except to get that Fleet here and fast! I only hope—”

The beam went suddenly dead. For a second the screen blurred, then Ketrik was looking into the room of the Ethero-Magnum again. But it was a different scene now.

**D**IFFERENT, because Dar Vaajo strode swiftly into view! He approached Praana who straightened up suddenly from the Magnum’s panel. Vaajo was trembling with rage, but Praana faced him defiantly. For a moment no one spoke. Then Vaajo turned, facing the screen so Ketrik could see him. Anger was still on his face, but something of triumph too.

“I really should thank you, Ketrik—and my daughter! I couldn’t have planned it better myself. So the entire Earth Fleet is coming, and I am warned! I shall wait until they are almost here before I use my weapon; yes, it should cover the entire expanse of the Fleet at one stroke! And after that”—he shrugged, permitted his cruel lips to fashion the faintest of smiles—after that, what shall I have to fear from a Fleet manned by mindless idiots? Yes, it will be a master stroke! Again I thank you.”

He flicked off the control. The screen before Ketrik’s eyes went dead, almost as dead as the hope within him.

The Fleet might have gotten through and taken Vaajo unawares, if it hadn’t been for him! Now Vaajo was warned, and Ketrik knew it was no idle boast he had made. The awful power of the Entity was quite capable of dealing with the Earth Fleet, especially as the Commanders had no idea of the type of thing they were facing. That it would strike suddenly and completely, Ketrik had no doubt.

His soul was bitter within him. He had but one chance left, a wild and improbable chance, but he mustn’t miss! It was hours later when he again heard footsteps overhead. He threw himself to the floor, pretended to be asleep. The electro was in his



hand, carefully concealed beneath him.

As he thought, it was a Guard bringing him food. From lowered lids he saw the ceiling trap slide back—slowly at first, then wider. The Guard leaned over, concentrated on lowering the platter of food on a long cord. When it had almost touched the floor, Ketrik brought out his hand and fired. It was simple as that. The man's body toppled through the opening, made a dull thud on the floor below.

So far so good, Ketrik thought grimly. He bunched the dead man's limbs under him, stood upon the sagging shoulders and leaped for the opening. A moment later he was swinging his body up and through.

He was in a dim, carpeted corridor, probably part of the servants' quarters. He hurried softly past a row of doors to the end of the hall, then up a short flight of stairs. A heavy door faced him. He pushed it open cautiously, then stepped out into a small flower garden. It was night, but Phobos was making a brilliant path across the sky. Unfortunate. But he'd have to make the best of it now.

He hugged the shadows until he got his bearings. This was the rear of the palace, he realized; at least that was lucky, for it brought him closer to that glass-domed building which he was sure was Vaajo's laboratory. It should be somewhere to the left of here.

Swiftly he crossed the garden. He passed through a tall hedge which concealed him from the palace. He followed the shadow of it all the way to the left, until he came in sight of the laboratory building. It was lying only fifty yards away—but fifty yards drenched in Phobos' glow!

He hesitated. But there was no other way. He started across the space leisurely, remembering he was still "Martian." The building was dark, there seemed to be no Guards about.

He was wrong in the latter surmise, he learned when he had almost reached the building. A voice challenged him. Almost in the same instant he saw the man, deep in the shadow of an arched doorway. Ketrik veered toward him, grunted something in reply and raised a hand in casual greeting. The Guard hesitated. Ketrik came two steps nearer. The Guard dropped a hand to his gun, and Ketrik hurled himself forward—low and hard.

The impact carried the Guard backward. Their combined weight crashed into a door, nearly taking it from the hinges. Ketrik rose quickly but the Guard didn't rise at all, and Ketrik knew his luck was still with him.

He changed his mind a second later. He heard shouts and pounding feet. Guards were all about the place, probably stationed at each of the doors! For a split second Ketrick hesitated. The only way now, was in.

He hurled his weight forward and the already weakened door crashed open.

**H**E HURRIED recklessly forward through darkness. He touched a smooth marble wall, allowed his finger-tips to brush lightly along it as he ran. His racing feet sent up echoes in the hollow place.

The Guards were crowding through the doorway behind him now. Suddenly lights leaped up! Just as suddenly, Ketrik swerved aside. An electro-beam hummed, came so close to him he could feel the swirling heat. He hurled himself into a dim cross-corridor, as more electros lanced out. But Ketrik was expert at this game. He raced for a stairway he could see just ahead. He was halfway up when the others came into view below him. He whirled, gave a sweeping burst with his own gun that sent them tumbling back out of range. He gained the second floor corridor.

Suddenly the lights came on there too! Someone at the master-switch was throwing on light all over the place! Ketrik preferred darkness. He couldn't keep this up interminably. Feet pounded on the stairs now. He opened the nearest door, slipped into a dark room. There he stood breathing heavily as the pursuers pounded by. He waited until their footsteps died away, then opened the door a crack.

It was almost his undoing. A beam creased his hair. He drew back, then suddenly flung the door wide and fired at the man they had left to guard the stairs. His beam sliced across the Guard's wrist, sent his gun spinning. But the man's scream of pain sent up shrill echoes that would bring the others back. Ketrik bowled the man aside as he leaped for the stairs leading up. At least he'd gained a few minutes!



He wasn't fleeing blindly now. He had an objective. He was sure the place he sought lay *above*—somewhere near that great, curved glass roof. He reached the third floor and continued upward. Then he groaned. The stairs ended at the next floor. A heavy metal door barred his way. He wasted precious seconds fumbling at the complicated mechanism—was about to use his electro to burn it away, when the great handle slid down under his pressure and the ponderous door swung aside. He leaped forward into more darkness.

There he paused, electro raised. This would be cutting off his own retreat, but he had to do it now! The beam lashed out, played across the door's inner mechanism. Gradually the tough metal fused under the heat. Ketrik made a thorough job of it, was satisfied at last that it would take them some time to blast through!

But he couldn't hear them out there. They should have reached the door by this time. He frowned, then drew out the short-wave scanner disc. He pressed the stud and tiny coils hummed to life. He moved the sliding sheathes around the rim and at last a thought-impression came through—a jumble of them. Ketrik knew his pursuers were standing on the stairs, hesitant and a bit frightened, staring at the metal door. Then a stronger impression came out of the thought-jumble as one of the Guards spoke. "Shall we go ahead? We can burn through the door."

"Enter that place?" came an answer, and Ketrik felt the mental shudder that came with the words. "I'd sooner go unarmed into a den of *hellas*!"

Other thoughts agreed. Ketrik grinned there in the dark. He knew now, that somewhere beyond him must be the lair of Dar Vaajo's *Entity*, and these men were deathly afraid of it. Finally another thought stabbed through.

"Very well. There's no retreat for him now anyway. We'll wait here, but one of you hurry to the palace and bring Dar Vaajo!"

Ketrik acted quickly then. He found the lights, saw that he was in a small metal-walled room. On the opposite side was another door, and near it was a tall case containing half a dozen protective suits.

He hurriedly donned one. It wasn't hard

to guess what they were for. The suit itself was of light mesh-beryllium, topped by a heavy *crystyte* helmet. Again he brought his weapon into play, destroyed the other five suits. Let Vaajo come! He would hardly dare enter this den without protective gear!

But even within the suit Ketrik didn't feel quite safe. He still remembered the power of the thing he had felt the previous night. His stomach turned over in a frightened yawn as he stepped through the opposite door.

## VIII

HE WAS ON a wide balcony. Near at hand was a tele-vise, a control-studded panel, and other complicated machinery. Overhead, seeming so near he could almost touch it, the great laboratory dome stretched out and away in its vast curve. While below . . . was emptiness. Now for the first time he realized the gigantic proportions of this building. A hundred feet below he saw bare floor. Probably twice that distance away, straight across from him, he could make out the opposite wall. There was nothing more, nothing in all that maw of space.

Peering at the walls, he saw strange instruments protruding. Short and tubular, literally thousands of them reached from the floor to the height of this balcony, stretching away across the walls as far as he could see. Ketrik thought he knew what they were—but he had to be sure.

He looked at the controls all about him. One huge panel contained thousands of studs. He depressed one. From the far away opposite wall a ray of white light needled out and slightly downward. He swept his hand across more studs, and other beams lanced out from the four walls—dozens, then hundreds. Ketrik was satisfied. Here, he knew were the controlling rays which Vaajo had spoken of. He shut the rays off, and looked further about him.

There was only the tele-vise, and two other instruments. One was merely a wheel, six feet in diameter. The other was a machine complicated beyond anything Ketrik had ever imagined. Giant tubes, coils, and alien looking grids nestled in

the bulk of it. Cables thick as his arm led to the nearest wall, thence upward to the lower rim of the glassite dome, and completely around it. From there, other cables dangled downward for a few feet into empty space.

Ketrik approached the control panel. It seemed simpler than he had supposed, but he studied it a while before reaching out a tentative hand to the first switch. The coils shrieked maddeningly, then the sound ascended the scale and passed beyond the audible. The giant tubes pulsed to life, throwing out a silver radiance. Then Ketrik reached out to what seemed to be a master-lever. He pulled it slowly toward him.

There came a sound, a sighing, which rose to tremendous crescendo as though every wind from the depths of space were sweeping in upon him! An awful vertigo as the dome, the floor, and all space between seemed to tilt crazily—into *nothingness*! He clung to the lever, sought to push it back. His mind reeled. Everything before him was merging into a grotesquerie of impossible angles and planes—and through it all came a twisting vortex of darkness, utter emptiness, that sought to sweep him out and away!

Then the lever gave before his surging muscles. It fell back into place. Everything came back to normal—except Ketrik. He allowed the dizziness to pass, and then grinning, he tried the stunt again! Two, three times more he tried it, with the same result, until he was quite sure of his mastery over that control.

For here was the machine he had hoped to find! Here was the means and the only means, of ridding the System once and for all of that Entity which Dar Vaajo in his madness had built up into such a weapon; a terribly alive weapon which, if allowed to go unchecked, with or without Dar Vaajo, could well become a menace to all the worlds! Ketrik realized that his task had reached the crucial point. A single mistake now, a mere miscalculation, and all would be over. So far he had only seen a manifestation of the Entity, not the thing itself. But he knew it must be here, somewhere very close—and waiting . . .

He stepped over to the towering perpendicular wheel.

IT MOVED easily beneath his hand. He was tense now, watching the great expanse of floor a hundred feet below. His surmise was correct. A tiny crack appeared there, extending the length of the floor. And upward from it came light—greenish, terrible light which he'd felt before, which he knew was the Entity itself, eager to lash outward! Almost, Ketrik hesitated. But he forced his hand to move the wheel.

The crack widened as the floor moved away on either side. Gradually he could see the Entity, the very bulk of it—maddening, impossible—but there it was! Fully a hundred feet across, greenish and blinding! It was roughly globular, seemed to be a giant brain slowly pulsing and evilly alive, yet somehow it was more than that. It was quasi-amorphous, writhing and changing shape and trying to heave itself upward! Tentacles lashed out—tentacles that seemed to be solidified light, seeking . . . seeking for sustenance!

It began to move upward. Up between the walls on a sliding platform, to a point just above the floor, where it stopped. Some of its light touched Ketrik, beat against his helmet and surged about him, tearing with cold fingers at his beryllium suit. In his absorbing interest he had almost forgotten the controlling rays! He hurled himself at the panel. With reckless sweeps of his hands he flicked on the studs.

He had been just in time. The white rays, lancing out from the walls, now formed a gorgeous criss-crossing pattern that held the Entity in leash. It writhed and cowered. Slowly its own tentacles of light drew back. It lay in seeming quiescence. But even then Ketrik received its thought-emanations, as they crashed with frightening impact upon his brain. Yes, the thing was alive and evil. Too long had Dar Vaajo held it in subservience. It wished to escape these barriers, launch out for itself. There was sustenance aplenty on Mars, and it would grow titanicallly. Then would come Earth—and there were many other planets.

Perhaps the Entity sensed Ketrik's rising horror. Perhaps it guessed what he meant to do! For now, despite the concentration of rays, it tried to lash out in new fury. Ketrik laughed then, a bit wildly; laughed in mockery and joy, see-

ing the thing in thrall, watching its futile efforts against the barriers . . .

Then the laughter died in his throat. Something was happening. The rays, the controlling rays across the walls—one by one they were blanking out! One by one, then suddenly whole rows at a time!

**K**ETRIK WHIRLED to the control-panel. Another figure was there—Dar Vaajo! Somewhere he had obtained another protective suit, had entered silently. Now he was blanking out the control-rays, enough of them to allow the power of the Entity through!

Even as Ketrik hurled himself forward, he saw madness on Vaajo's face. More of the rays blanked off as Vaajo swept his hand down. Then Ketrik was upon him. The two metal-suited figures clashed, went spinning backward and then to the floor of the balcony in a wild tangle.

Dar Vaajo was old but he was still tough and wiry. He had the strength of a madman now. He kept Ketrik at bay as the latter sought to grip his throat. He laughed wildly as Ketrik pounded futilely at the tough *crystyte* helmet. Then Ketrik knew why he laughed. The damage had been done, the power of the Entity was lashing through the barriers now! A tendril of light curled about Ketrik's head. Even through the helmet he felt the insatiable greed of it, as his brain exploded in fire.

He forgot Dar Vaajo, managed to drag himself upward. He staggered toward the huge Vortex machine. Vaajo hurled against his legs and brought him crashing down. His brain was now a writhing agony of fire. He saw Vaajo's grinning face near his own, and knew that somehow Vaajo wasn't affected by the Entity; perhaps years of working so close to it had made him partially immune. Slowly Ketrik managed to bring his knees up under the other's body, then his feet. With his last remaining strength he lashed out.

He saw the Martian's slight body hurl backward. It crashed into the balcony's low railing which caught him just at the knees. For a moment Vaajo tottered, arms flailing wildly; then his mouth opened in what must have been a shriek as he went over the edge, over and downward,

to crash a hundred feet below into the great greenish bulk of the Entity.

But Ketrik didn't see that. He was dragging himself the few remaining yards to the Vortex machine, then slowly up to the controls. Heedless now of the frantic light-tendrils that tried to stop him, he managed to turn on the control. He sank to the floor as he pulled back on the master lever.

It was through blurring eyes this time that he saw the crazy tilting of the laboratory dome and everything beneath, saw the dark Vortex twisting through from an alien space. As though in a dream he saw a rush of light, glimpsed a greenish mass hurtling outward to disappear in a convergence of crazy space-angles. . . .

After that he remembered finding his electro which had skidded away on the floor. He used it to blast the Vortex machine into tangled ruin. He remembered staggering to the tele-vise and turning it on, and seeing Praana's face from a screen somewhere in the palace.

"Praana . . . the laboratory . . . your father is . . ." But that was all. He was sliding forward against the screen, sliding down to the floor into merciful oblivion.

**H**E SAW her face again and it was no longer startled, it was smiling down at him. He tried to sit up. A spasm of pain hit him. He heard her say, "Rest. You will be all right soon."

He was lying on a couch somewhere in the palace. Servants were hovering around anxiously. Praana sent them away. Presently she said, "I've contacted the Earth Fleet's flagship. They will be here sometime tomorrow. They come in peace."

He managed to nod. "You know about the other? Your father—he was . . ." He stopped the words in time, his face twisted as he thought of it.

"Don't be afraid to say it." Praana still managed to smile. "Yes, I know it now, we all know! He was mad. Mars as well as Earth owes you a debt of gratitude it can never repay." She hesitated. "I want to forget. I must get away, somewhere far away. I should like to return to Earth, for just a little while."

Ketrik grinned. He lay back. He had wanted to hear her say that.

# ENTER THE NEBULA

By CARL JACOBI

The greatest cracksmen in the Galaxy—The Nebula . . .  
mocked by a gay voice that called herself Andromeda, who  
led him into danger—and into the hands of his enemy!

**P**HIL HANLEY came out of the managing editor's office and strode savagely to his desk in the paper littered city room. It was one P.M., between editions, and the reporters and copy-desk men of the *Martian Globe* were taking things easy for the moment. Hanley slumped into his chair, kicked his feet up on his auto-typewriter, and mouthed an oath. "He can't do it," he growled. "Who the hell does he think I am anyway? I'll quit, that's what I'll do."

"Not again," taunted McFee, a rewrite man.

"Yes, again," snarled Hanley. "And this time I mean it. Do you know what that lopsided jackass wants me to do? Get a personal interview with the Nebula. For all I know, the Nebula might be a four dimensional robot."

McFee lit a cigarette and leaned against the desk. "Did the old man really hand you that for an assignment?"

Hanley nodded, his anger passing now into glumness. "It's a compliment, I suppose," he said, "for anyone to think I might have even a chance." His eyes turned from the room and stared unseeing through the window into the metropolitan area of Crater City.

"The Nebula," he said slowly. "Every dick and I.P. man in the System has been tearing his hair, trying to get a lead on who or what he is. The Nebula! The greatest cracksmen of all time!"

McFee exhaled a lungful of smoke. "He's quite a guy, isn't he?"

Deliberately Hanley dropped his feet to the floor and sat erect. "Listen," he said, "he's the Robin Hood of the day, if you can possibly remember your ancient history. Two years ago he swiped the electric jewels from the atomic motors of the *Fortuna*, the gambling space ship, broke them into two hundred parts and

gave them to the Society for Orphaned Children. A year ago he entered the inner rooms of the Venus Gallery and made off with the *Cosmic Lady*, the greatest painting of the age.

"The man's a wizard. No vault door, no lock mechanism keeps him out. He walks in, takes what he wants, and leaves before the I.P. men know what's happened. All they find is that little pastel-blue card with the cluster of white dots in the shape of the Constellation Orion. That's what gave him the name of the Nebula, you see."

McFee nodded. "I know," he said, "but who is he? And what's his permanent address?"

For a moment Hanley said nothing. He reached in his pocket, drew out a bulldog pipe and a worn tobacco pouch. A glitter was slowly entering his eyes. "You know," he said, "I have half a mind to try and find out at that."

**T**HE MERCURY CLOCK over the white mantel chimed the hour of eight A.M., and Jimmy Starr sat up in bed yawning. As the last note faded into silence, the door of the room opened, and a white-haired man entered, carrying a tray.

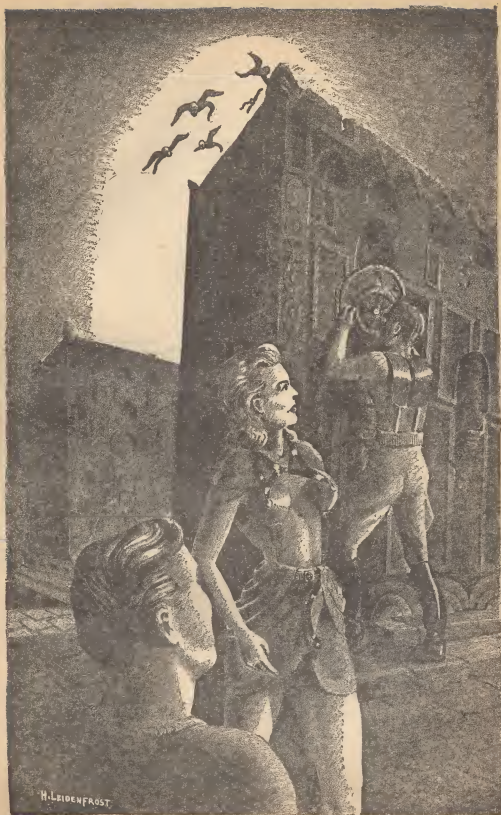
"Good morning, Mr. Starr."

"Good morning, Peters," Jimmy said. "Did you bring the paper?"

The servant nodded, propped a morning edition against Jimmy's upraised knees and placed the breakfast tray on the side of the bed. "Will you have orange juice or Martian melon today?" he asked.

"Orange juice, I believe," replied Jimmy absently, and then coughed to hide the sudden tenseness that had entered his voice. He waited impatiently while the aged servant opened the window blinds and busied himself about the room.

When at last the man had gone, Jimmy



*He seized the ancient combination wheel . . .*

sat bolt upright and stared at the screaming type.

## NEBULA ON THE LOOSE AGAIN

GENTLEMAN BURGLAR PROVES  
TO BE COMMON CRIMINAL

The running story was bitter in its denunciation. Where before those same columns had accepted each new exploit of the Nebula as a prank upon the police and an irritation to the wealthy, they now demanded legal action. For this time the Nebula had committed murder!

The Crater City Museum had been robbed during the night. Three priceless Thro-Pahl figurines had been stolen. An aged night watchman had been brutally beaten to death.

"The guilt is undeniable," the paper continued. "Drunk with power, this sadist had the effrontery to leave behind one of his mocking cards. What are the police going to do about it?"

Jimmy Starr leaned back and let a soft whistle escape from his lips. The newspaper story was all wrong. For Jimmy Starr had spent the entire night in his apartment. And Jimmy Starr was the Nebula!

He didn't know quite how long he had been playing this dual role. Years now, ever since his father, Randall Starr, president of the Triplanetary Freight Lines had been murdered and had left his enormous fortune to his son.

Randall Starr had come up from poverty with his only heritage, a brilliant mind and skillful hands. He had dabbled in a little of everything before he had become associated with the Venus-Mars-Earth shipping business. But all during his years of executive activity, he had always found time for two things: his hobby, the manufacture and study of theft-proof materials and devices; and the deciphering of the ancient *Lost Chronicles* of Mars.

It was this last that had resulted in his untimely end. Jimmy Starr had known for a long time that his father was on the verge of a great discovery, but what that discovery was he had had no inkling.

"Wait 'til I've finished," Randall Starr would always say when questioned. "Some day I'll have an announcement to make that will startle all Mars."

And then one night Jimmy Starr

had been awakened by a terrific crash down stairs in the lower-floor study. He had rushed to the room to find his father stretched out on the floor, blood trickling from a gaping wound in his head. The window was open, showing the way of the assailant's escape. Randall Starr's filing cabinet had been thrown to the floor and battered open with some heavy instrument. Papers lay strewn about in wild disorder.

Jimmy knelt at his father's side, in time to hear the old man's last gasping words. "The . . . *Chronicles* . . . they took . . . the five cyphers. You must get them back, Jimmy, before the last one is completed and the secret discovered. You must, do you understand? The future of all life on this planet depends on it."

"Who . . . ?" choked Jimmy. "Tell me who, and I'll . . ."

But the effort had been too great. The old man fell back, his warning unfinished.

Clues? Jimmy had employed the finest detectives on Mars in a vain attempt to track down the guilty one. He had followed trails himself, questioned all of his father's former friends and associates. The one and only shred of evidence he had led him no place. This was a polished *falpa* button which Randall Starr had torn from his assailant's tunic during the struggle—the type of button which members of the limited *superiors* class effected. The *superiors* were a throw-back to the feudalistic days of a by-gone age. Powerful overlords with inherited political and financial power, they still wielded a strong influence over an otherwise partially modernized society.

So this much Jimmy knew—his father had been murdered and the *Chronicles* cypher taken by a man who walked in the highest brackets of the System's social worlds.

**I**N TIME Jimmy's grief passed, and he began to follow in his father's footsteps. Theoretically, he was acting head of Triplanetary. But with the shipping line operating smoothly with hundreds of efficient under-officials, there was little for him to do. After graduating from the Martian School of Technology, he toured the System in his own space-yacht. It was that trip that brought home to him the



poverty and sordid conditions existent in the various worlds.

On Venus he had seen powerful land-owners growing fat and rich while native Kamalis and Sarakans toiled in the swamps. On Mars he had toured the luxurious plaisances and estates of the D.O.F.C.—the Descendents of the First Colonists—and a hundred miles out in the desert had walked through the stinking narrow streets of the Thedras, the despised aboriginals of the West Plateaus.

Then and there Jimmy Starr had decided to add a twofold purpose to his life. He would do all in his power to aid the oppressed poor, and he would strain every effort to plague the lives of the *superiors* class. Some day, in some way, that effort would lead him, he felt sure, to his father's murderer and the stolen *Chronicles* cypher. The only item in question was the time element.

He spent six months in his father's private library, studying everything he could find on locks, time vaults, hermetic chambers and impenetrable walls. Six months more went into a thorough reading on the various subjects of criminology, micro-fingerprints, robot detectors.

He had begun quietly at first, a small art treasure taken from the collection of some greedy *superiors* millionaire. But gradually the daring of those thefts, the absolute lack of clues, with the exception of the tell-tale blue card, had attracted attention. In a year his fame had spread as far as Pluto. In six months more the Nebula was a byword in every tongue.

The police had sworn action, the press had chuckled, and the public had looked with open admiration on this benefactor of the downtrodden.

Now all that was over. The Nebula was a criminal. He was accused of murder.

Slowly Jimmy Starr got out of bed and began to dress. Funny, he had never thought of this contingency. Someone had seen an opportunity to profit by his name, and had utilized it with cold-blooded efficiency.

He lit a cheroot and stood there smoking. A bell tinkled behind him, announcing a call on the visiphone. He crossed to the panel, touched a stud. A voice came out of the speaker, but no image appeared on the vision screen.

"Good morning, Nebula!"

An electric shock swept through him. His cheroot slipped from his fingers.

"Good morning, Nebula. Answer please."

Mechanically Jimmy's fingers found the transmitting button and clicked it over. But he stood out of range of the vision screen as he replied, "Who's speaking?"

The feminine voice, sweet and musical, laughed gaily. "I'm sorry I can't tell you that. You may call me Andromeda, if you will. Now listen closely, Jimmy Starr. I know your secret. I know that you live a dual life, that you are that much sought after gentleman cracksman, the Nebula."

The voice laughed again, but there was no mockery in it. "You needn't be afraid, Jimmy, I'm not going to let the cat out of the bag. But I will, unless you agree to follow my orders. Is that clear?"

For a long moment Jimmy stood there in silence.

"Never mind," the voice continued, "I didn't expect you to admit it. But listen. The Nebula is no longer a champion of the poor. In the eyes of the press and the police, he has committed murder. I know that you are innocent of that charge. It is now eight-thirty. In exactly fifteen hours you will go to the central offices of the Crater City Trust Company at Ninth and Planet. You will enter in any way you see fit, open the vault and take from the compartment marked W-203 the three articles it contains. Do you understand? Compartment W-203."

There was a click and the visiphone was silent.

Frantically Jimmy twisted the control switch on and off. "Hello," he said, "hello!"

HE TURNED slowly to face the looking glass on the opposite wall mirrored the sudden haggardness that had entered his features. In half an hour his entire world had crashed. His identity was known. He was wanted for a foul crime.

Yes, he had been hunted before, but now the police and the I.P. men would leave no stone unturned in their efforts to capture him. His pursuers would be relentless.

He paced to the window and looked down on the Martian city. To the east



where the main sky ramp led to the city's space port lay the huge ditch that was the beginning of Canal Grand. Like a crayon smear on a piece of cardboard, it stretched off into the desert, bleak and desolate.

AT FIFTEEN MINUTES past eleven that night Jimmy Starr opened a panel in his room and took his place in a cylindrical shell, touched a control and settled back. Save for a slight jar and an audible hum, there was no sensation of movement. Moments later the tube-cage jarred again, the door slid open, and he climbed out on a small lighted kiosk in the center of a well of darkness. A narrow ramp led upward, and he made his way to the street level in a few quick strides.

He now stood on the intersection of Ninth and Planet.

Jimmy Starr sauntered across the street, studying each passerby out of the corner of his eyes. Before the entrance of the Crater City Trust Company he paused to light a cheroot. He stood there, smoking quietly while a turbaned Kagor from the North Desert Country shuffled by, dragging his cumbersome third leg after him.

Then he slipped open his tunic, exposing a small compact carry-case strapped about his middle. Opening it, he selected from its array of objects a slender metal tube, capped at one end. To this he quickly fastened a small ball of hardened carponium clay. He unscrewed a cap in the clay ball and inserted a small pellet.

With flying fingers, he shoved the tube hard against the door lock. That lock was not the best, but it was one of the most dependable theft-proof devices on the market.

Mentally he counted the seconds as each pulsation within the tube was transmitted to his hand. At the tenth he stiffened. There was a dull thud, a little puff of smoke, and a grating and jangling as of breaking glass.

Then he was inside, pacing down the center aisle of the main office. He had no need for a torch. The place was brilliantly lighted with overhead carboliers, and he knew that he was clearly visible from the street.

In rapid strides he reached the far end of the office, where an enormous vault door of *arelium* steel was imbedded in a

frame of *kartite*. That frame was anchored in natural rock piers ninety feet below. The entire structure was as impregnable as human intellect could make it.

Jimmy Starr leaped over the low railing that separated the vault from the office proper. Again he opened the little carry-case and from a lower compartment took out a tightly rolled Martian papyrus.

He was working fast now, putting into action a plan that he had formed on his visit to this office earlier in the day. Then, while he had stood discussing the financial status of Triplanetary Shipping with one of the Trust Company officials, he had managed to slip out a tiny camera and, unobserved, take a quick photograph of the rear wall of the office.

Back in his own apartment it had been the work of a few moments to transfer the scene on the negative onto this elastic papyrus.

He stood up on the railing, fastened the two ends of the papyrus to the side wall; then, utilizing all his strength, stretched it across the full width of the office to the opposite wall.

Finished, he slipped behind the screen with a gay laugh. Let a passerby gaze in the street window now. He would see a deserted office with the unmolested vault in clear view. From the street no one could know that vault was an enlarged photograph on a screen, and that behind that screen crouched the most wanted cracksmen on Mars—the Nebula!

He spent a moment surveying the massive vault. "Craig-Orlan, Series A, Model Four," he muttered appreciatively. "Mercury time lock, rondulated tumblers, protected with individual micacaps. This is going to be tough."

He took from the carry-case a pair of earphones, snapped them on and pressed their connection to the panel just below the main dial. Slowly he began to turn that dial, straining his ears for tell-tale clicks.

The silence of the office pressed down upon him. Far off sounded the hollow roar as the night Earth Express blasted down to its cradle.

For several minutes he continued. Then his brow furrowed in a frown. "Must have a shield of some kind behind it," he muttered. He opened the carry-case again,

drew forth a tiny electric drill with a wedge-shaped bit. A low hum sounded as he switched the drill on and pressed it against the panel.

When an aperture of half an inch in depth had been bored, he removed the drill and placed in the opening another of his pellets. Ten seconds and the puff of blue smoke. Once more he slipped on the headphones.

This time a smile of satisfaction turned his lips. In the receivers he could hear distinctly each metallic click as the grooved tumblers fell into position. He reached up now and shoved a huge *kapar* bar far over in its slot. On silent hinges the enormous vault door began to open.

But this was only the beginning. It was a full hour before he had penetrated the second and third inner doors of the vault, another half hour before he located in the vast array of files, Compartment W-203.

ABOUT to open it, he stood motionless in thought. What was he doing here? Why was he ransacking the vault of the Crater City Trust, one of the most respected and ethical financial institutions in the city? He wanted nothing of theirs. More than that, there was a murder charge on his head, and he was deliberately taking chances when all logic screamed at him to hide.

As in a dream he heard that musical voice that had come over the visiphone, "*Listen, Jimmy Starr, I know your secret. . .*" He inserted a false key in the file lock and opened it.

Nothing! The compartment was empty.

A wave of bitterness swept over him. He thrust the compartment shut savagely and turned to leave the vault. Half way he halted in mid-stride.

A sound had reached his ears from the opposite side of the papyrus screen, the sound of someone fumbling with the latch of the front entrance door.

Quickly Jimmy passed through the three doors of the vault. He paused before the combination to slide a small card under the dial. Pastel-blue in color, that card bore the design of the constellation Orion.

Then he reached up, whipped down the papyrus screen and crouched back of the railing. The man at the front entrance had discovered the broken lock; the door

crashed open; excited footsteps pounded inward.

Bending low, Jimmy darted down the side aisle, keeping his head well below the top of the desks. Once he shot a look at the intruder. It was Hamilton Garth, president of Crater City Trust! A gray-haired man with a wiry build, an iron visage, and heavy-browed gimlet eyes. Before the yawning door of the vault Garth stopped short and uttered a cry of consternation. He spun on his heel and with rapid strides made for the door.

But not before Jimmy had reached it. He raced through the entrance just as Garth sighted him and gave a hoarse shout.

Jimmy raced down the street a hundred yards, then hurled himself into an alley. A police officer was running toward him, attracted by Garth's cries.

Even as Jimmy crouched there, new sounds added to the confusion. The alarm tocsin of the Crater City Trust shrilled up and up into the rarified air. Far down the street the answering siren of the I.P. depot rose in deafening crescendo. Jimmy could hear windows bang open in the buildings across the thoroughfare. The emergency street lamps flared on, turning the intersection into a stage of ghastly white.

The alley-way in which he crouched was a dead-end. Jimmy thrust aside the wave of helplessness that swept over him and steeled himself for action. The Nebula couldn't be caught. Not now with brutality dogging his footsteps.

With a swift movement he whipped off the tunic, threw it from him. Frantically he opened the carry-case and took from it a short collapsible rod, a folded rakish evening cap. He shoved the carry-case under his waist coat, hoping that the bulge would not be detected, set the cap on his head at a jaunty angle and jerked the rod out to its full four feet.

That rod was an explosive detonator for use on time doors when all other means of entrance failed. But it was a cane now. Swinging it, Jimmy darted out into the glare of the street, then began to pace leisurely forward straight in the direction of Crater City Trust.

When he reached the entrance, a small crowd had gathered, and Hamilton Garth was in their midst excitedly talking to an I.P. officer.

"Vault doors wide open!" he was shouting. "Second and third doors, too! It's the Nebula! I saw his card. Why the devil don't you do something?"

The I.P. man was taking notes in a little book. "Calm yourself, Mr. Garth," he said. "Whoever broke in here can't get away this time. The impenetration walls have automatically closed down. The entire area is cut off by a ring of steel."

"But it's the Nebula I tell you, you stupid fool!" cried Garth. "While you stand there like an idiot—" The eyes of the Trust Company president suddenly fastened on Jimmy, leaning comfortably on his rod-cane at the edge of the growing crowd. "Mr. Starr, I'm certainly glad to see you. Help me. Tell me what I should do. . . ."

Nodding quietly, Jimmy stepped forward. To the I.P. he said casually, "J. C. Starr, president of Triplanetary Shipping. How much has been stolen, officer?"

Another I.P. man emerged from the Trust office. "Only one compartment opened, sir. W-203."

Hamilton Garth looked bewildered. "That's odd," he said. "The W series of files are all unused. There's nothing in any of them."

Jimmy laughed. "Mr. Garth, you can consider yourself a lucky man. The Nebula seems to have muffed things this time. Good night."

He turned and sauntered off down the street.

IT WAS the following morning, and for an hour Jimmy Starr had sat by the visiphone in his room, waiting for a call. A tray of half-smoked cheroots lay on the table beside the instrument.

The bell sounded. Jimmy touched the stud.

"Good morning, Nebula. We failed last night, didn't we?"

He leaned back in his chair and smiled. Though that haunting musical voice stirred him deeply, he had full control of himself now. For an hour he had been preparing mentally what he would say.

"Young woman," he said, "or Andromeda, as you choose to call yourself, I haven't the slightest idea of what you're talking about. Yesterday you made a connection with my instrument and hung up

without revealing your image. My name is James C. Starr, and if you wish to converse with me, I suggest you show yourself. Otherwise . . ."

"Wait!" The gayness left the unseen girl's voice. "Wait, don't touch that stud. We failed last night, Jimmy Starr. But we can't fail again tonight. Everything is at stake. Do you understand, everything. The very future of life here on Mars. Jimmy, what do you know about the canals?"

"The canals?" He forgot his protestations to consider thoughtfully. "Why nothing much. They're to be opened and filled with water in a year. Everyone knows that. So far the locks have been giving the engineers a little trouble, but . . ."

"Not a little trouble, Jimmy. A whole lot of trouble. At the present time specifications call for a hundred and twelve locks and sub power stations down the length of Canal Grand alone. And there are seven hundred and eight subsidiary canals branching into the main stem. Add to those figures the number of lesser canals branching into the subsidiary canals, the necessary freight and passenger depots, and you can see what a tremendous engineering project it will be."

"It can be done," Jimmy said confidently.

"It can, yes, if the engineers locate a new deposit of *pxar*, the part organic, part inorganic material that alone will withstand the terrible refraction-rot of the red desert country."

Jimmy didn't know what she was driving at, but what she said was true. Refraction-rot, the multiple infra-red light radiations from the scarlet sands of the desert played hob with all kinds of construction work. *Pxar* alone had the resiliency and the hardness to withstand the terrible disintegration processes of the shifting sands. And there was very little *pxar* left.

The voice continued:

"Jimmy, I can't tell you everything yet. But I can tell you this. By joining forces with me, you will be working toward the recovery of your father's lost secret and the identification of the man who murdered him.

"Tonight at midnight you will enter the

offices of Phobos Enterprises and take from their vault the paper-wrapped box on the third shelf. Good luck, Nebula."

PHIL HANLEY, reporter of the *Globe*, let himself into his apartment, strode straight to the liquor cabinet and took a stiff drink. Then he sat down before a table and spread an array of objects before him.

They were a curious collection: A polished *falpa* button of the type affected by members of the *superiors* class; two panelled cards, each with the design of the Constellation Orion, two rather blurred photographs of finger prints, and a notebook.

These findings were the results of Hanley's activities during the night. Still obsessed with his plan to get a signed interview with the Nebula, he had reasoned, logically enough, that the only way to do so was to learn first the cracksman's identity.

The button first. It was elliptical in shape and bore that curious triangular emblem so hated by the poorer classes. Hanley had found it on the office floor of the Crater City Trust Company. He realized, however, that any number of *superiors* might have business with that establishment and that the button's presence there meant nothing.

In rotation he examined the two panelled cards and the fingerprint photographs. He brought a powerful atolight down and studied them with the aid of a *proberglass*.

At the end of five minutes a low whistle of amazement came to his lips. He pushed glass and light away and brought forward the discovery he had deliberately reserved for the last. The notebook.

There was no reason to believe it the property of the Nebula. The Nebula didn't go around dropping private journals for inquisitive reporters to find. Hanley had discovered it half hidden in the gutter before the entrance of the Crater City Museum where the night watchman had been murdered.

The notebook contained but a single page of writing. In heavy penmanship the words read:

*The figurines are pure pxar. The breakdown analysis will prove that, I am sure.*

*But whether the figurines will serve their intended purpose is a question that can be answered only by experiment. If my decipherment of the Chronicles is correct, I must have thousands of them, and to obtain them it will be necessary to locate the Tombs. Does the marking Ka Ce 54 W bear any significance?*

Phil Hanley read those words twice, then leaned back, frowning. Presently he roused himself, strode to a wall cabinet and took down a book labeled, *Ancient Mars—the Webley Theories of the Early Life*.

He carried the book back to the table, but before he could open it, steps sounded along the outer corridor leading to his door. A moment later the door banged open, and a figure crossed the threshold.

Hanley had but a split instant to utter a gasp of astonished recognition. Then he saw the heat gun leveled directly at him, and with a twisting leap, he lunged for the connecting door of the adjoining room.

JIMMY STARR was panting when he reached his room. The clock on the mantel showed five A.M., and since midnight he had been living with double interest his role as a fugitive.

Without realizing why, he had obeyed to the letter the instructions of the voice on the visiphone. That single suggestion that his efforts might lead him to the murderer of his father had spurred him on. He had entered Phobos Enterprises, taken the package described. But getting away this time had been a terrible ordeal.

The I.P. men were on the alert. All Crater City patrols were in readiness. The impenetration walls were down everywhere, checkerboarding the metropolis into five hundred separate and distinct guarded areas.

Three times he had missed capture by a scant margin. He had crawled sixty feet through an exhaust *sordite* tube when any second the motors leading to it might have seared his body to a crisp with their discharges. With an I.P. man close on his heels, he had swung over a dizzy canyon of space and catwalked across a sustaining bar from one building to another. And it seemed now he could still hear that cry that rose up to him on the building roof from the street below:

*"Death to the Nebula!"*

On the table the package for which he had risked so much lay open. Jimmy scowled down upon its contents: three Thro-Pahl figurines, gray in color, eighteen inches in height, each the likeness of an armor-clad Martian of the first dynasty. To an art collector they were undoubtedly wondrous artifacts, but to Jimmy they meant nothing.

The visiphone bell sounded. Heart pounding, Jimmy touched the stud and heard again that voice.

*"Good morning, Nebula. We made it this time. I'm so glad."*

He stared into the blank screen silently. What did she look like, the owner of that haunting voice? Was she dark or fair? Was she. . . ? "Who are you?" he said huskily.

"There isn't time for that now, Jimmy. Tell me, have you examined the figurines?"

He had the vision plate turned on, and he nodded in reply.

"Look at them again. Look at their composition. It's not the carving I'm—we're—interested in. It's their structure. Don't you see, Jimmy? It's *pxar*."

He didn't see, and he waited for her to continue.

*"Pxar*—the same material that the engineers need for their construction work for the canal locks, the only material that will withstand the radiations of the Red Desert sands.

"Those figurines are old, Jimmy. They were carved during the days of the First Dynasty when the original canal locks were built. Today there's practically none left. Yet without *pxar* the canal project is doomed to failure.

"Now pick up one of the figurines and examine its base. Do you see that tiny three-cornered prong that projects from it? Like a root, a stunted root reaching out for nourishment."

THE GIRL'S VOICE became breathless. "Jimmy, that was your father's secret. He spent the last days of his life deciphering the *Lost Chronicles*, and for years it has been my work too. You see, chemical analysis has proved that under certain conditions *pxar* will grow and reproduce its own kind. The early Martians knew this, and they also knew that the

time would come when there would be no more of it available. So they designed those figurines to be superimposed on the bodies of living Martians. The root-claw would then reach down, embed itself in the flesh and suck out the vital life."

"I—I don't understand," Jimmy said slowly.

"Let me put it this way. If the base of one of those figurines is fastened to the body of a Martian, the root will adhere to that body, and the figurine will become a living parasite, growing and developing in size, until amoeba-like, it will divide into two.

"Jimmy, there's a monstrous plot brewing here on Mars. Your father discovered that secret and realized it was so deadly he meant to lock it away forever in the files of the Interplanetary Council. But before he could do that, he was murdered and the incomplete cyphers stolen. Those cyphers have now been worked out. Someone has made plans to sell an enormous quantity of *pxar* to the development company that's building the canal locks. They're going to create that *pxar* by feeding those figurines and thousands like them off the bodies of unsuspecting Martians."

"But how?" Jimmy interjected.

"I don't know how. Not yet, though I've been piecing the threads of this puzzle together for weeks now. It wasn't until five days ago that I was able to decipher completely the code of the *Chronicles*. I did know that your father was working on the cypher, too, because he and I frequented the same libraries, but it was only by accident that I discovered that that cypher was the reason behind his murder.

"Once started, the *pxar* plot will be a plague, a Martian black death. Once started, those figurines will multiply and grow. And here's the damnable part of it, Jimmy. After a certain number of the figurines have been given life, they will also acquire self mobility. Do you understand? It means that they will spread, advance from the body of one Martian to another of their own accord. That's the black revelation of the *Chronicles*—the fact that this plague happened on this planet once before, was responsible for the complete extinction of the first dynasty Martians."

He turned the gray figurine over and over in his hands. There was a glitter in his eyes now, a glitter of excitement. Things were falling into place in his brain like pieces of a puzzle.

"Examine those images," the girl's voice suddenly ordered. "Do you see any mark on them at all?"

One by one he studied every inch of their surfaces. Abruptly his eyes caught a tiny series of even scratches along the thigh of one of the figurines.

"Ka Ce 54 W," he read slowly.

For a moment silence answered him. Then the voice uttered a low gasp. "It's the first section of the third cypher," she said. "It means . . . wait a minute . . . it means that the Tombs are in the Dur-Par section of the desert. Jimmy, we've got to go there."

"The Tombs?" he repeated.

"Yes, according to the *Chronicles*, a secret store of thousands of those parasitical figurines is hidden somewhere out in the Red Desert. The first dynasty Martions, you see, prepared for the emergency which they knew was inevitable, the disappearance of *pxar* from this planet. That was before they knew of the images' plague properties.

"We've got a race on our hands, Jimmy. Even now the man who first stole the figurines may be heading directly for the Tombs."

Jimmy Starr took out a cheroot, lit it mechanically. Then he voiced a single question. "You must have a personal interest in this matter. What is it?"

She had the answer for that too. "My brother," she said, "is one of the technical officials for the canal-locks project. A murder charge was framed on him, and he was given the alternative of being 'exposed' to the I.P. men or agreeing to accept all the *pxar* an unidentified source could supply with no questions asked. He has agreed.

"I . . . I love my brother, but this has gone beyond personalities now. This is plague, wholesale murder; all Mars is at stake."

Jimmy Starr made an instant decision. "Where will I meet you?" he said.

She considered. Then, "You'll find instructions at the Canal Grand entrance. Good luck, Jimmy."

HALF AN HOUR later Jimmy climbed out of a tube-cage and emerged onto a deserted square at the outskirts of Crater City. Before him, dim in the overhead light, a sign read:

THE CANALS  
POSITIVELY NO TRESPASSING  
ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK

Before the sign stood a small kiosk with dusty bulletins tacked upon it. Jimmy waited impatiently, pacing to and fro. Then his eye caught sight of a small envelope protruding from a crevice on the kiosk wall. It bore no name or address, but upon its surface was the design of the Constellation Orion.

Inside, a scrap of paper bore the written words: "*Canal Grand—south. Way Station X. I'll meet you there.*"

He pursed his lips. What kind of a game was this? Unseen speakers on the visiphone. Mysterious messages directing him into the unknown. It smacked of a twentieth century thriller.

All his inherent sense of danger warned him to turn back. In answer, that haunting voice rang again in his ears: "*Good luck, Jimmy.*"

He turned to the stair well and began to descend. Darkness was here, and he could feel the thick red dust under his shoes as he went down. Fifty-seven . . . fifty-eight . . . first . . . second . . . third level. Not until he reached the bottom and stood before the massive door leading into the canal did he switch on his electric torch. Then he stared.

The door yawned open. Twenty feet beyond, drawn up at the near wall of the great ditch, was a tracto-car. And before that car there were three men preparing to board.

Jimmy stared as he recognized the foremost of the three. Hamilton Garth! The Trust Company official stood there calmly in the glare of the torch, waiting for him to approach.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Garth demanded.

It was a tight question, but fortunately Garth was so absorbed in his own plans and movements that he did not wait for an answer. "Sloan and Barker," he said shortly, waving his hand toward his two

companions. "I.P. men. We're trailing the Nebula."

"But I thought nothing was stolen from your office," Jimmy said slowly. "You said . . ."

Garth scowled. "Money, tangibles, no. But prestige, tremendously. Do you realize, sir, what it will mean when the public learns that a cheap cracksman can walk into my vault as if it had a revolving door? I've offered fifty thousand *plantoles* for the arrest of the Nebula, and I'm going to set an example by being the first to start on his trail."

"I see." Jimmy studied him in thoughtful silence. "And his trail starts here?"

"In the canal, yes. We received an unsigned tip half an hour ago that the Nebula was heading south down Canal Grand. You're coming with us, of course."

As the tracto-car rocketed dizzily down the huge ditch, Jimmy hunkered down in the tonneau seat and let his thoughts run wild. This tip Garth had spoken of. . . . Could it be that she . . . ?

He forced his eyes toward the way ahead, deliberately guiding his mind into other channels. It wasn't the first time he had been in the canals, but it was the first time he had penetrated this far. The powerful triple-beam atolight cut a swath of radiance ahead like a chalkmark on a blackboard. Revealed in its glare were the mountainous-high walls of red stone on either side, the red floor between, hard packed, smooth as a pavement. Dimly in the reflected glow he could see the serrated lines high up near the top of the near wall, the marks of the ancient water levels, and at intervals he could see the crumbling ruins of a counting depot.

What glory, what pomp and circumstance this mighty ditch had seen. Gilded canopied barges of the first and second dynasty kings, military floats, ore and shipping rafts, all drifting in an endless procession across the arid wastes of the Red Desert. Army transports loaded with armored troops advancing and retreating, converging through the labyrinthian network of subsidiary canals to battle the capital itself.

And today the wonders of the past were on the verge of being repeated. Engineers were struggling frantically to overcome the one problem that so far had baffled them

—the finding of a supply of *pxar* sufficient to rebuild the locks.

Ahead a lone Kiloto swooped out of the darkness into the span of light, whirled frantically and missed the onrushing car by inches.

Presently a low rubble of masonry loomed before them. Hamilton Garth tapped the I.P. man driver on the shoulder. "Way station," he said. "Pull in there. We'll look for clues."

It was a forlorn spot. A few *pxar* columns stood sentinel-like at the entrance. A roofless plaisance stretched beyond. Here and there were the remnants of crude hydro-dovolic mechanism chambers. Hamilton Garth made a thorough examination of the place with his torch. The search was fruitless, of course, and he stood up with a scowl.

"I suggest we split up and look around outside," he said. "Sloan, you take the east side; Barker, take the right, and I'll go straight down the canals for a ways. Mr. Starr, you'd better stay here, if you don't mind."

It suited Jimmy. This was the place where he was scheduled to meet Andromeda, and the sooner he could be alone, the better. Even now he was tingling with excitement at the thought of unveiling the owner of that hidden voice.

THE TWO I.P. men and Garth shuffled off into the sand. Silence and the loneliness of the Martian night closed in on Jimmy. He crossed to a block of stone and slumped down on it wearily. From far off somewhere the banshee scream of a prowler shattered the stillness. It died away, came again, and then merged eerily into the wail of an Enzo-cat, the two-headed carrion-eater of the desert. And then suddenly a voice behind him said, "Don't look now, Jimmy, but a friend of yours is here."

He wheeled and brought up the electric torch as simultaneously a hand grasped his.

"Not here, Jimmy. No light, please. Come, there's not a moment to lose."

A slender figure was partly visible in the gloom. A faint scent of Martian *trofero* touched his nostrils.

Before he could protest further he found himself guided out of the Way Station and



out into the sand. Presently a small two-seater tracto-car rose up before them. There was no sign of Garth or the two I.P. men. The girl leaped in, touched a stud, and the car trembled with life. Two seconds later they were boring into the darkness.

"Can I look now?" Jimmy demanded.

She laughed. "If you like."

He switched on the torch. A young dark-haired girl with clear brown eyes and lovely features smiled back at him. She was beautiful.

He settled deeper in the seat. "Garth and the two I.P. men. Why didn't they come back?"

She didn't reply to that. Savagely with a sudden frantic twist of the wheel she maneuvered the tracto-car on a tangent toward the east bank of the canal. Even as she did, a man-high ribbon of white iridescence shot toward them. It was a spear-headed ellipse of blinding light with a whipping comet-like tail.

"Refraction-protract," she cried. Under her skillful guidance the car turned left, then right, to miss the oncoming beam by inches. The girl uttered a sigh of relief. "That was too close for comfort," she said. "Those refraction-protracts are disintegrating light rays stored up by the Red Desert sands and released by sudden changes in temperature. We'll have to watch ourselves."

They drove on in silence. Questions were surging through Jimmy's brain, but he said nothing, waiting for the girl to explain.

"Would it surprise you very much if I told you the man behind all this is Hamilton Garth?"

He went slowly rigid. "Garth? But he—"

"Told you he was trailing the Nebula. That was a neat way to divert suspicion from himself. You see, Garth, although a member of the *superiors* class, has been having financial trouble with both of his companies lately, Crater City Trust, and Phobos Enterprises. Some of his investments went wrong; in particular, an expedition he financed to Pluto was never heard from again. He needed funds desperately and *pxar* was his answer.

"How he learned that your father's work in deciphering the *Chronicles* was

connected with this strange material, we probably shall never know. The important thing is he did find out and immediately took steps to acquire them. But even after he had them it was necessary to complete the cypher before he could learn the secret. Garth must have found a passage in some work other than the *Chronicles* that led him to suspect vaguely the nature of the final revelation."

Jimmy nodded slowly. "I see," he said. "And after Garth has located the supply of figurines, he intends to launch them on their parasitical work and sell the supply of *pxar* he thus accumulates to the engineers. But neither the Martians nor the engineers would consent to such a diabolical plan."

The girl smiled grimly and touched a stud on the dash, increasing the speed of the car. "Garth took care of that, too," she explained. "He planned to advertise all over Mars a sanitarium devoted to the cure of every conceivable kind of ill. It was to be located in the mountains beyond the Red Desert Country. Once a patient was admitted, his doom was sealed.

"It was Garth, of course, who broke into the Crater City Museum, stole the three Thro-Pahl figurines and killed the night-watchman. Previously he had designed a fake Nebula signature card, and he left this behind at the scene of the crime. He's a member of the *superiors* class, you must remember, and his hatred for the man who was making a mockery of that class was intense."

DAWN came up slowly, a reddish haze at first, then a brilliant glare that turned the canal into a glittering avenue of crimson reflections. They roared east along a canal that steadily grew narrower.

Presently, far ahead, a depression became visible in the side wall. Up this depression a nature-formed ramp led to the upper level.

"This is the end of the line," the girl said. She gave a short laugh. "Do you realize, Mr. Starr, you haven't even asked me my name?"

He colored, stammered something.

"It's Linda," she said, "Linda Hall. Come. Up this way."

The climb was hard, grueling work, and when at length they reached the summit,

man and girl were panting from the exertion. But here Jimmy looked upon a scene of utter desolation. As far as the eye could reach stretched a vast plain. No cairn, no monolithic pile of rocks broke the bleak monotony.

Linda, however, moved forward with a quick step. She had a small metal box with needle dials in her hand now, and she consulted it at intervals. For a quarter of a mile they plodded across the flat. Then Jimmy saw that the needles on the dials were fluttering wildly.

"Stand here," she told him.

She moved off on a tangent, walking carefully, studying the ground. He watched her figure grow smaller and smaller. Abruptly she halted and waved to him frantically. He hurried to her side.

She stood at the brink of a deep cleft in the plain floor. Rectangular in shape, it seemed to bore down and down into measureless depths. Jimmy felt his heart skip a beat. A flight of ladder-like stairs descended into the well, and lying prone at the top of those stairs was a man.

A deep searing burn ran from his temple down the left side of his face, about which blood had caked and hardened. Jimmy knelt and fumbled for a pulse. A faint flutter touched his fingers. He whipped a flask from his pocket and brought it to the man's lips.

He moaned, opened his eyes weakly and rose up on one elbow.

"Who are you?" Jimmy demanded.

At first his words were unintelligible. Then the haze which clouded his eyes cleared somewhat.

"Name's Hanley," he said weakly. "Phil Hanley. Represent the *Martian Globe*. Hamilton Garth's down there. We've got to stop him."

Hanley struggled with short jerky sentences. "Garth blasted me with a heat gun. Tried to do it once before in my own apartment, but I managed to get away from him. This time he thought he'd done for me. He's after the figurines. *By the blazing eternal! Are you the Nebula?*"

SIX HUNDRED and thirty-nine steps led to the bottom of the shaft. In places the rock had crumbled so badly the greatest care had to be taken, or a misstep would have meant plunging into the abyss.

Curiously, no sand seemed to have drifted here; the air was dry and clear.

Hanley, still unsteady from the burn he had received, examined the hieroglyphics on the stone walls with puzzled eyes.

"This place must have been discovered before," he said. "It isn't possible that this shaft could have remained here all these years without someone stumbling upon it."

Linda nodded. "It's presence has been known, of course," she replied. "It leads to an underground cavern that stretches for miles under the surface. It's the burial place of the first dynasty Martians. But there are many such places below the Red Desert country. Always it has been thought they contained nothing of value."

They reached the bottom level and stood staring out before them. Where the floor of the desert above had been red in color, the surface here was ochre, a dull uncertain floor that gave off a radiance of its own and illuminated the underground cavern with a faint unreal glow. The grotto stretched in three directions as far as the light permitted them to see. At intervals of every twenty feet or so, large rectangular blocks, ten to fifteen feet high and twelve feet long, dotted the expanse. In a way the place looked like a vast apiary.

"Each one is a grave," Linda said quietly. "The block, of course, is only a marker. The crypt is lower down."

Jimmy scowled. "And one of those crypts contains the figurines, eh? Like looking for a needle in a haystack."

She gripped his arm. "We've got to find the right one before Garth. We've got to, do you understand! He's somewhere down here now, with those two hirelings of his. When—if—we do find it, this will destroy them." She pressed a short tube in Jimmy's hands.

Like three sleep-walkers, they paced slowly out among the stone blocks. And now Jimmy realized the proportions of the task they had set themselves to do. Each of the blocks was equipped with a vault-like door of massive weight and size, surrounded by a panel of those strange hieroglyphics, and with an intricate series of bizarre lock dials on its surface. The blocks looked exactly the same.

Above them in the dimness of the ceiling a heavy whirring sounded, and at in-

tervals a curious bird-like creature with pointed wings and a weazened human face swooped down to be momentarily visible in the half light.

"*Sarkonivals*," Linda said shortly. "The early Martians were superstitious of them and transported them here to guard the burial grounds. They must feed on a variety of moss that grows down here."

They moved on. The rows of burial blocks seemed endless. Jimmy came to a halt.

"We're getting no place fast," he said. "Have you no clue at all as to which block it might be?"

Linda shook her head. Hanley was staring up above him, apparently fascinated by the strange flying creatures.

"You know," he said slowly, "I read about those *sarkonivals* once. They always fly in groups of an even twenty, save when some atmospheric disturbance causes them to alter their formation."

He pointed upward. "They *are* all in groups of twenty except over that block over there. Above that they seem to be in confusion."

Jimmy followed his gaze and frowned thoughtfully. He paced forward to the block in question, stood there watching the movements of the *sarkonivals*.

Suddenly he turned to Linda. "Look. See how their flying formation is always the same? They're twenty of them up there all right, and they start to circle the block in a compact mass. But as soon as they strike a point directly above it, they separate. First five, then three, then two, six, one, and three. Always the same order. Do you suppose that might be the combination? A magnetic disturbance issuing from the block in such a way as to prevent the usual twenty-formation and break it up in that fashion?"

"Jimmy!" Her eyes lighted. "I think you've got it!"

He seized the ancient combination wheel, put his strength to it. Slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, it began to turn. Jimmy hesitated.

"I can't read these numerals, if they are numerals," he said. "I don't know where to start."

Linda studied the markings. "I think that's the symbol for absolute zero," she said. "Try it anyway."

He began to turn the wheel again, counting off the numbers as he watched the irregular formation of *sarkonivals* above him. "Five, three, two, six, one, three."

Twice he tried with no result. The third time there was a dull whirring somewhere in the bowels of the block, and the door slowly swung open. Within, a short passageway ended at another door, equipped with another series of dials.

Here Jimmy nodded in satisfaction. "I should be able to crack this."

He opened his carry-case, took out the headphones and slipped them on. Linda and Hanley pressed close, watching him.

"Hurry," the girl said. "I don't like it here."

A voice behind answered her.

"No need to hurry, Mr. Starr, alias the Nebula. Just take your time, but be sure you open it."

**THEY WHEELED.** Three figures blocked the passage. In the lead, leaning comfortably against the side wall, stood Hamilton Garth, a heat gun leveled before him. Behind him were the two pseudo-I.P. men.

"Very nice of you to save us the trouble of locating the figurine cache," Garth said smoothly. "Now all you have to do is open that inner door and then help us carry a load of the images back to our tractor-car. You have nothing to worry about. If you obey orders, no harm will come to you. If you don't, well, don't forget I have a nice ace-in-the-hole. I have only to tell the world that James C. Starr, president of Triplanetary Shipping is the much-wanted cracksman, the Nebula."

Jimmy, Linda, and Hanley looked at each other.

"Come," said Garth. "This place oppresses me as much as it does you. Get to work."

Silently Jimmy adjusted the headphones again and began to move the dials. Five minutes passed. Then he stood back, grasped the handle and pulled the door open.

The interior was black, but a click of the torch revealed row upon row of Thro-Pahl images. There were hundreds here, and there must be hundreds more in the lower crypt.

And then Jimmy remembered the metal

tube Linda had given him when they first entered this underground chamber. He drew forth the tube and with a quick motion threw it before him.

Nothing! The crypt remained steeped in silence.

"What was that you threw?" demanded Garth. "Answer, damn you!"

Jimmy shrugged. "It was a tube of *setro-frenalot*—NSK 54," he said. "I think you know what that means, Mr. Garth. The double detonation explosive. If it doesn't explode upon the first impact, the slightest jar, the slightest whisper of sound will discharge it."

Garth's face went black with rage. "You damned double-crossing—!"

He tossed his heat gun to one of the two pseudo-I.P. men and plunged into the vault. Halfway the significance of Jimmy's words came home to him. Gingerly, a step at a time, he began to work his way toward the metal tube that lay in the light of his electric torch.

Now he stood directly above it. He reached down, let his fingers fasten about the tube. With the greatest of care, he lifted it and began to catwalk back to the door of the vault.

But at the threshold Jimmy uttered a cry of alarm and swept Linda protectingly into his arms.

"What's the matter?" Garth demanded.

"The *calibo-marset* fire. Blue flame. It's started in the *setro-frenalot*. It's going to go off."

Garth's eyes shot wide with fear. He looked down at the tube in his hands, then abruptly swung and hurled it through the open doorway into the vault.

There was a low roar, mounting to a crescendo report. A cloud of smoke belched outward, and the ground beneath their feet trembled. At the first indication of Garth's action, Jimmy, Linda, and Hanley had hurled themselves backward, away from the vault door. Garth too had whirled and leaped like a released spring to safety.

But the two I.P. men were caught. They had not heard Jimmy's exclamation—hadn't time to guess what was coming. An avalanche of rubble and huge stones washed forward to sweep relentlessly over them. An instant later only a sound of dust-rising debris and masonry fragments

marked the spot where they had stood.

As the deafening reverberations rolled back into silence, Hamilton Garth seemed to grasp the significance of the situation like a man in a dream. For a moment he stood there, rigid, eyes narrowing, lips quivering. Then with a snarl of profanity, he charged straight at Jimmy Starr.

Jimmy's head was still reeling dizzily from a blow dealt him by a flying chunk of rock, and he saw the onrushing Trust man through a haze. Garth's fist bludgeoned into his jaw. Another blow drove into his midsection, sent a wave of nausea sweeping through him. And then a picture of his father lying helpless on the study floor shot into his mind's eye; with it came a sudden realization of all that the *superiors* class—Garth's class—stood for. He snapped his fists forward and began to hit with all the strength he possessed at the face before him. He was still flailing his arms in and out, when Hanley stepped in and pulled him back.

IT WAS the following morning, and the tractor-car was speeding smoothly down Canal Grand. In the driver's seat sat Jimmy Starr, a bandage on his temple, a smile on his face.

Beside him was Linda Hall, and in the rear tonneau Phil Hanley held a heat gun to cover the bound figure of Hamilton Garth.

"We did it," Jimmy said at length. "The figurine cache is destroyed forever."

The girl nodded.

"And the canal project won't be abandoned either," Jimmy continued. "That explosion opened up a shaft leading to a still lower crypt where there's enough pure *pxar* ingots stored to build all the canal locks the engineers need. Pure *pxar*. Not the figurine kind."

Linda nodded again.

"What I want to know is this," she said. "I know that that tube you threw into the vault didn't go off the first time because the detonator-cap didn't hit. But what kind of explosive is *setro-frenalot*? I never heard of it."

"Neither did I," Jimmy laughed. "It goes back to the juke box age of the twentieth century. In other words, double talk."



# THE DERELICT

~~~~~ BY ~~~~~  
WILLIAM J. MATTHEWS

MURPHY ANDERSON

The end of the trail . . . he knew it, she knew it, old Hanu knew it and so Jeff Thorne stumbled off into the Martian desert—to die. But death takes strange forms out there . . .

GEOFFREY THORNE was "on the beach." Face down on it, in fact, head and shoulders deep in the brackish eddies of the slowly rising tide, the sluggish waters of the North Nergal Polar cap. And it was odds he would die there miserably in his drunken stupor, had not there come a sudden interruption of the t'ang-ridden miasm in which he lay.

A sibilant rush of feet dashed across the worn Martian sand, splashed into the shallows, and Thorne felt quick, vital hands snatch and roll him face up, slapping a dull sensitivity into his addled wits. He shook his head dazedly, realized his predicament, and feebly struggled to rise. It was beyond his power.

With a snort of disgust, his rescuers caught him under the arms and dragged him unceremoniously backward. Once clear enough of the dull waters rolling languidly upon the low, hot beach, he let go and Thorne sat down heavily in the sand.

"I'd call that a waste of effort," a well-fed voice coldly observed.

"Paul, please!" replied a woman's softer voice. Thorne shook his head viciously, raised himself on one arm, and sought to focus his blurred vision on the group facing him.

There were a dozen or so, well-dressed, well-fed, bright with color and metal in the sunshine. Tourists. He looked up at the young petty officer of International who had dragged him from the water. There was a pained look of weary resignation on the clean-cut young face as he turned to his temporary charges.

"I must apologize, ladies and gentlemen. This bit of local color was unscheduled. It happens occasionally on the inner planets. Conditions grow too rigorous and a man—uh—goes down."

Thorne laughed, a dreadful, choked hacking that set the fluttering tourists back a step or two in sheer fright.

"A man goes down, kid." He rubbed his eyes and leered at them. "Damned far down that you show him off like a Martian

The officer of International Airways,

Inc., winced and then added, to his group, "He's right, you know. Privacy's about all that's left up here on this station. Shall we go on? There are the caves I promised to show you, farther along."

He moved up the beach, the tourists straggling after him, still looking back at the dejected figure of Thorne half-lying, half-sitting in the hot sand. Their voices came drifting back upon his throbbing consciousness.

"But, Mr. Atlee," a woman's voice urged, "we can't just leave him there like that. Mightn't he drown?"

"The tide doesn't come much higher, Miss Thurland. He'll be all right. Once out of that coma, he won't drop into it again for a day or two, unless he gets more t'ang."

"What is this t'ang, Mr. Atlee?" another woman asked. "A Martian drink?"

"Yes, it is. High explosive . . . and one drink wrecks a man for life. They never get it out of their systems, and they don't much care. It's like the opium off Jupiter, only worse. They'd kill for it. Fortunately, they can't get it any too easily—but it's not fortunate for poor devils like Thorne."

They were gone, then. The last had vanished in the misty haze spun by the blazing sunshine on the northern rocks. Heading for the Vulhan caves farther along no doubt. Rock crystals and ancient weapons from some forgotten battle there for the picking up, glittering gew-gaws to pleasure lazy, personally-conducted school-teachers and insurance-brokers on holiday. A crooked grin twisted Thorne's lips. It hadn't been so easy a few years ago.

It had been hard. Too hard for Jeff Thorne.

Well, there was always t'ang.

HE HEAVED himself up, shook the sand from his ragged clothes, and lurched unsteadily to the water's edge. Kneeling, he splashed the cool, brackish stuff on his muddy face, his swollen hands. He was running them listlessly through his dark hair, trying to conquer its wild *thok*, buddy."



disorder, when a sound behind him brought him about with an oath. His brows darkened.

"You're missing the show at the Caves," he pointed out, a sneer in his rasping voice. "Or do you prefer this?" He waved rudely at the hot sand, the dulling ripples, the low, pulpy vegetation crowning the long slope up the beach.

The girl watched him steadily, her hands tight upon a small red and white bag, and under her grave, slow regard a dull flush crept along his cheek-bones to lose itself in the stubby tangle of beard. The dark blue eyes were soft and thoughtful and more than a little sad. Mirrored in them, for the first time in many months, Thorne saw for a moment what he had become and the flush died away in a gray-white pallor. It was not pleasant.

"You—are Mr. Geoffrey Thorne?" she asked. The rich tones of her voice sent a tingle through the hapless derelict of the void. How long since he had heard a woman say "Mister Thorne"? How long since he had heard a woman so much as address him? His crooked grin returned. "My name is . . . Jeff Thorne, Miss," he replied.

She smiled in answer, a smile only slightly less awry. "You don't know me, Mr. Thorne. I'm Helen Thurland. A friend of mine, Nancy Bertrand, was once stewardess on your Venus-Titan run. She thought the world of you."

"Then I'm glad she didn't accompany you," Thorne rasped. He plunged raggedly up the slope toward the inviting shade of the floppy vegetable trees cresting the rise. "Get out of that sun, girl. It's hotter than you think."

In silent obedience she followed, but he turned at the top to lower at her. "Is Miss Bertrand at Vulhan City?" he demanded. "If she is, and you bring her here to look at . . . at me . . ."

The girl looked down at the glittering sunlight on the sea. "Nancy isn't at the City."

He sighed gustily with relief. "I thought plenty of her myself," he admitted, slumping down against a thick tree-trunk. "The best I . . ." He paused; then looked out to sea himself, fingering his whiskers.

"The best stewardess you ever had," she completed. Taking off the huge, floppy hat affected by tourists in the Martian

heat, she looked down thoughtfully at him.

"She's dead, you know."

He stiffened, "Nancy?"

"Yes. A meteor in the tubes, they said. And the pilot couldn't land anywhere but on Io—and not good even there. There weren't many left. She's buried there, by a little green lake. I went there first this spring. I—I wish I hadn't. And just now, when Mr. Atlee named you, I thought of a space-pilot who wouldn't have left those stones on Io. The best pilot International ever had."

His lean, dirty fingers wrung aimlessly together. His heel ploughed a recurrent furrow in the shadows. "That pilot is as dead—as Nancy. Poor little kid." He gnawed his lip. It would not do to go maudlin. Not now.

"You are Geoffrey Thorne, International?" she insisted, sitting on a fallen trunk and dropping her hat at her side. Leaning forward, she watched his pallor darken. "You are the pilot who pioneered the Jupiter and Pluto runs, who rescued the Argonaut expedition, who broke up the Wind River and Merton gangs?"

HE LOOKED at her and she shrank from the pain in his glare. "You heard Atlee. I'm Thorne, if that's anything. You saw him, a green space-kid fresh from the Lunar way-stations with two-year ratings on his pretty red uniform . . . saw him drag a sodden bum from what passes for a gutter here. He was nice to me, Atlee. They're all nice to me. But I can't even enter Vulhan City any more. One of the worst sink-holes in the System and I can't get in . . . I can't get in . . ." his voice trailed away aimlessly and he picked at a thread dangling from his burst tunic.

"But—is there anything for you?" she asked. "It is a sink-hole. I suppose that's why Mr. Atlee was detailed to take us out to these caves on the stop-over. But there's no work there, no good chance for a pilot such as you."

He laughed. It was a better effort than the one he had achieved on the beach, but she preferred the former. "No chance, indeed! But there's t'ang. There's always t'ang!" he laughed, then caught at his ribs as a shuddering spasm tore at him.

"Please!" She touched him, ever so slightly, shaking his trembling body.



"You mustn't! Is there nothing you can do? Nothing? Can you not go home?"

He faced her squarely and his eyes, she noted, were less bloodshot and oddly steady as he looked into hers. "You don't know. It isn't generally known, I suppose, anywhere in the System. We can't go back."

"You can't give it up?"

"That among other things. But no ship will take a t'anger, even as a passenger. That's what they call us, when not worse. They say it's incurable. Lord knows I couldn't disprove it. I can't give it up, and, if they took it away from me . . ." he shrugged and a chill rippled up her spine. "You might say we're marooned here, on Mars, on Pluto, on Venus . . . all who take up with these weird native brews and weirder natives. We don't go back. We can't. And we don't want to."

"I can't believe that," she protested. Then, at his tragic, sidelong glance, she hastened on. "But this t'ang? What is it? How—how did *you* ever come to—to get mixed up with such . . .?" She floundered helplessly, and some inborn instinct of gentility prompted him to rise and scan the sea for a moment. Then he turned, watching her. Again his eyes and fingers sought a ragged strip of scarlet tunic to twist aimlessly.

"It wasn't much," he admitted. "There was a crash a couple of years ago. Faulty tube drive. We lost some passengers and all our stores. It was a two-hundred mile trek to Luxtol City, over the Phidian desert. I suppose you saw it, flying up here. Nothing but t'ang bushes . . . and their berries to eat. I got the taste and it's . . ." His voice faded away and, looking up, she saw a strange wryness pass over his face.

**T**HEN HE SHRUGGED, laughing. "What's the use? You're not for that old line. Just a line. A sponger's plea." His voice stung. "It got money once. Handouts. And now it's worn out and I can tell you the truth . . . a simpler truth than a simple lie. No, I didn't get the taste in any such soul-satisfying way. T'ang berries are deadly poisonous.

"I was young and a fool for luck with gun or ship. I dragged in a little fame, notoriety if you will, breaking up a gang or two preying on the International. We

pioneered, those days, and drank. Lots of things, among them t'ang. Grandstanding to the old-timers. Nothing could down the great Jeff Thorne. I took a drink—and another. You see the result. Two years ago I was cock of the walk and king of the space-ways; today a snotty drags me out of the muck to keep me from stifling . . . and no great favor, either."

She was silent for a long time. Then she took up her hat and slowly rose to her feet. "It's too late, then?" There was sadness in her eyes as she met his sullen glance. He shrugged and turned away, deliberately rude. There was the rumble of the sea beneath it all.

"Too late."

"Is—is there anything . . .?"

"Thank you, no." He did not see her hesitate, then open her bag. Several paper notes were thrust into his lax hand. He turned angrily, but she looked so shame-faced and embarrassed he cut short his first instinctive outburst. She put out her hand. "Please. It isn't much—for either of us. Let it be a present from Nancy, too. To Jeff Thorne, International."

He looked down at the money, System credits on Terran banks. "Twenty. You know where it'll go, I suppose. For t'ang"

"That's no matter, Mr. Thorne. It's your life. I spend most of my time telling others what and what not to do, as a teacher. Let me forget on my vacation."

He smiled through the tangle of his unkempt beard, an almost savage gleam of white teeth in the shadows. "I'll forget, won't I? I've forgotten so much already, you see." He crushed the credits in grimy fingers. "This, too. But . . . I thank you . . . and you'd better go. Beach-combers, even on Mars, aren't any more savory than the old kind on Earth, and I'd not have those others talking, Miss. I'll remember Nancy and I'll remember her friend; you forget Jeff Thorne, unless to point a moral to your students."

She smiled, holding out a hand, pink-palmed and clean. "Not that, Mr. Thorne. Goodbye."

Instinctively he met her grasp, using the hand which he clutched her money. For a moment he paused, then slowly let his hand drop back to his side.

"Not that way, either, Miss . . . Miss Thurland. Just goodbye."

He watched her walk swiftly up the beach, a slender, graceful figure in the bright sunlight. Sleek and clean and decent, copper-tinted hair glittering about her small head until she put on her hat. She did not pause or look back. And then she was gone.

A fresh shadow fell across the sand. Thorne, breaking in upon his moody abstraction, turned with a start to face a tall Martian native who stood impassively watching him. A slim spear glittered and twinkled in the moving foliage above the man's grey-polled head.

A smile spread vacuously across Thorne's countenance, loosening his lean jaw and dulling his eyes. He held out the credits. "Look, Hanu! Money! We can send one of your young men now to the City. I shall have it again."

The Martian did not stir. From the thick grey mane of hair mantling his lean and apish countenance two great unblinking eyes stared disconcertingly at the bedraggled Earthman he had fed and sheltered this past year. The bony figure on its thin legs did not seem to breathe, so still he remained, and Thorne shambled forward in slow alarm, mumbling a question. The Martian evaded him with silken ease, but as he stepped aside his thin arm stretched out, prehensile fingers extended like claws. They struck the notes from Thorne's lax hand.

"Here! What the devil, Hanu?" Indignation stirred the returning lethargy gripping the derelict, and he came up with an angry jerk. The long fish-spear dropped, the razored blade resting across the fallen money as if to slice it in two. The Martian's voice was thin, but gravely dignified.

"No, Thorne. No man goes to the City."

"What the devil do you mean?"

HANU GROPED for words in the lingua franca which served the races for communication on all the inner worlds. He stroked thoughtfully at his thick Boer beard, pain in his great round eyes.

"You came here, friend Thorne, in great trouble. The devil-juice was in your blood and your friends had driven you forth as all who drink the t'ang must go. We are simple folk. My people were glad

of you, for we have been friendly to your Earthmen, and I have been glad, truly glad. You have been good and our friend, in spite of the t'ang. We have asked nothing of you."

"I know that," Thorne rapped impatiently. He edged nearer the fallen money. "I've had food, clothing, and shelter from your people. Perhaps I've even had friendship. I needed it. But why refuse me now?"

The Martian impaled a note on his spear and held it out to Thorne. His long-nosed face grew stern and the lean body tightened. "We refuse nothing, friend Thorne. You are no longer with us, or of us. Take up your money if you will, but go."

"Why?"

The great eyes swung up the beach, then back to the sagging beachcomber. The note fluttered from his blade. "A woman's money, friend Thorne. Not even t'ang can excuse beggary."

Thorne staggered back. Shuddering, icy nausea ripped through his worn frame. Clenching his fists, he turned his back on the tall Martian that his blinding shame might not be seen. A rustle of paper told him the native chieftain was gathering up the fallen currency. He did not turn. But a gentle poke from the spear-butt awoke him from his daze and he turned at last, to find his money presented at his breast upon the chief's blade. Slowly he took it, slowly tore it across and across, dropping it listlessly upon the sand.

"Where shall I go?" he asked, more of the empty air than of the grave Martian watching him so sadly. The native shook his grey-maned head.

"Where shall any t'anger go?" he replied. The sting of the epithet, although innocently meant by the generous Martian, twisted Thorne's sadden mind until he pounded his temples with a groan of empty pain.

"Where, indeed, good Hanu?" Almost he laughed, throwing wide his tattered arms in the remnants of the brave red International jacket. "To the north Vulhan City and the gutter, to the south your people and a greater contempt than theirs, for I have tried to be their friend. Oh, I know, Hanu! It's in your eyes. It's in mine, too. There for good and all. So

what's left but the sea again . . . and no petty fool to drag me forth to shame me even before you, the last of all my friends."

"I am your friend always, friend Thorne." The Martian's voice was gentle. "But you have come to the end. You know that now. But not in the sea."

"Where else?" Thorne sat down abruptly, his legs giving way beneath him. A haze was descending over his foggy mind and he pressed his temples again, burying his face in his hands. Hanu nodded to the left.

"The desert."

Thorne looked up, amazed. "That horror!"

"The desert is slow . . . but not unkind. There will be many things to think on as you walk." Hanu leaned on his spear, regarding the sunken wreck sitting before him. "Our old men go forth in the evening when they no longer care to live. Our wicked pass from us across the sand, for we do not kill. There is peace there . . . and rest. What else, we do not know. They never return."

A shudder passed over the beachcomber. Slowly he rose to his feet. "No," he admitted, staring with a grudging, affectionate admiration at the grey one. "You do not kill." Abruptly he offered his hand. "Before I go?"

Hanu smiled, pulling his whisker. "You will go? The woman is already gone and we will forget her like yesterday's tide, but we shall not forget the man who was with us that far-off day. We shall not forget." The pink-palmed, five-fingered hand clasped Thorne's. "Forget us not, friend Thorne."

"I won't, Hanu. Goodby . . . and thanks. It's all I can leave you, friend, but I know it counts, even from a space-rat like myself." Abruptly he wheeled and trudged away up the slope toward the higher trees back of the beach. He did not look back, even when Hanu's spear plunged into the sand twenty feet ahead and the grieving Martian wailed a piercing call of farewell.

Taking the gift, Thorne staggered wearily on. Trees rose and fell about him, rude, stubby giants with the fat, pulpy stems designed to catch and store the precious polar waters melting before the first summer sun. The ridge passed and the rolling, bushy foothills along the coast led him

endlessly down through the salt marshes where strange shapes moved and stirred at sight of the alien intruder. Then the arid hills beyond and, at last, cresting a bush-straggled rise, Thorne saw before him the first dun sweep of the vast inland deserts that have laid Mars waste and brought low a proud civilization.

He slept there that first night, hollowing a little scoop of reddish sand for his ragged hip and a mound for this neck. For a time, after the first quick darkness, he lay watching Mar's rolling moons wheel across the horizon, silvering all the desolation and shimmering into a clear, alien beauty the ruin time had brought.

Hanu, the chief, had been right. There were thoughts. But gradually the bitterness and ache of defeat sank away on a flood-tide of weariness and Thorne slept beneath the Martian moons.

**A**N INQUISITIVE sand-lizard, poking at his spear with its horny nose, awoke him before dawn. Not hungry enough to destroy the little monstrosity, Thorne shooed it away and scrambled up. There was a thirst inside him blurring his vision . . . but not for the water he was abandoning. Again, as so often in the recent past, he would have sold what remained of his soul for a bottle of the dreadful, numbing t'ang. But here one was as remote as the other. He gritted his teeth and moved slowly down the ridge toward the distant south.

Hour after hour plodded wearily on as the dull-eyed Earthling lurched in a slow, dreadful stride farther and farther into the blazing Martian desert. The hot sunlight glanced and blazed in glittering splendor from his keen spearblade, slung across his back with a strip torn from his ragged tunic. It scorched fiercely and persistently at the hat he had made from a withered desert plant's dun leaf. It burned the reddening sands to blister the man's half-bare soles through the torn pilot's boots. It crisped the thin atmosphere to nostril-tingling flame . . .

From time to time he came on bushes, tiny, low-squatting bushes with yellow pads for leaves and deadly stings for thorns. Their flesh was death. Twice he passed a thin-stalked t'ang bush, hiding in the lee of some crested dune, flaunting

its crimson and black fruit at the weary, shuddering traveler. There, too, was death. Thorne grinned. And what else but the slower death and decay brewed from these devil-berries drove him thus hopeless into the wastes to be at peace and die?

The second day he found a body. Perhaps one of the old men of Hanu's wise, grave tribe, setting out into the sunset like Ulysses to seek one last wonder before the long night overtook him. Perhaps a condemned man sent gravely forth to wander and seek repentance before suffering his natural penalty. Thorne could not tell. It was a skeleton by now. A polished spear lay across the arching ribs and the bony hands were clasped upon it in a strange gesture of resignation, as though the man had laid himself down at last to rest.

He found two more such skeletons before night. The spear of one lay through the broken ribs, and he shuddered. The man had not waited. Although his body, numbed and ravaged by the fires of t'ang, required little now to sustain its life, it was weakening fast and a deeper lethargy was creeping over him. He wondered when it would be that he, too, must lie down at last, folding his hands on his breast, and watch the sun go down or rise for the last time. Well, it would find him ready.

For Hanu had been right and all his tribesmen in their strange, funereal rites had known well what they had been about. The great, eternal waste of rolling sand and barren rock, the solemn passing of the ageless sun and silent moons had borne down upon Thorne until from their unhurried peace had been born a quieter peace within his breast. Hunger and thirst, numbed by the strain of the t'ang in his system, faded almost unnoticed into a lethargy. Even the screaming need of the drugging liquid which had tortured him at first was fading.

Soon there would be nothing left but the silent golden sun, the ruddy sands . . . and another quiet skeleton watching the brassy sky with dark, unseeing eyes of bone. Thorne cracked his tortured lips in a grin. At least it would not be in a gutter of Vulhan City or face down in the flooding Nergal tide, a shoaling hulk . . .

Slowly he moved on through the night. He had lost track of how many nights. It was cooler so. He watched Phobos rise

in cool splendor far across the sands, a thin black streak standing upright across her shining disk. For a moment he stared in dull, uncomprehending wonder, then bent his head and plodded quietly onward.

Why he walked he did not know, for he had long ceased to question this strange, ultimate Odyssey on which he had embarked. He only knew he must go on and on, the one unreasoning urge linking him to the old, proud heritage of the pioneers of trail and sea and space. And for such as he there was no turning back . . .

When he tripped upon a rotted balk of timber and pitched headlong to the sand he did not know. For a moment he lay there, unmoving. Then, with a sigh, he attempted to rise, but exhaustion swept over his relaxed body in a shuddering flood and he sank back, asleep almost before he touched the sand.

It was the growing heat of the sun that awakened him, well past mid-day. Dull, lack-lustre eyes opened and stared unseeingly upward. Grimy, wasted hands twitched weakly upon the sand. A faint breath like a sigh crept between the cracked and swollen lips.

IT WAS minutes later, as he instinctively groped for his friend's spear to lay across his chest as had those others ere they died, that Thorne came to realize he could not see the sun. Hot, dusty radiations danced about over his head, and glimmering motes hung in the shadowy depths beyond his weakened vision, but somehow, faintly, the realization of shadow crept over his worn-out consciousness. With the realization came a slowly growing perception of light as he focused his eyes upon the tapering, unbelievable mass of the gigantic monolith looming over him.

Three thousand feet it leaped into the Martian sky, a ragged, broken tower of grey-white stone, turreted with fantastic decay, eroded and pitted by the storms and dust of twice ten thousand years.

He turned his head. Beyond it loomed another, only slightly less massive, but far more eroded. Here and there, standing in a rough semi-circle, other towers reared their broken heads into the brassy bowl of the sky, mere shattered heaps of dusty rubble.

Slowly Thorne sat up. He was huddled

at the base of the tallest monument atop a sloping pile of broken sand and shards drifting down from the decaying walls. Beneath him long gray shadows of what had once been piers crept out into a low, extensive basin of sand, broken here and there by heaped mounds jagged with age-grey timber.

"Ships!" he whispered. "By all the Krue of Mars, ships!"

He dragged himself upright. A glance behind him showed him the futility of hope. The tremendous edifice at whose base he had fallen had ages since crumbled within itself until, collapsing inward, it had fused into one solid pillar of worn masonry and powdered sand. The others were even less preserved, but wrecked, shattered, decaying as they were, there remained about their hoary turrets a splendor so great he instinctively straightened his weary form. In the presence of so magnificent a declaration by man, he took on a new dignity worthy of their unyielding might.

HERE, THEN, lay one of those ancient citadels of a long-gone race, the ancestors of the silent, peaceful Martians of today. A teeming metropolis of the North, it had shrunk and perished with the death of the drying seas whose disappearance had all but ruined the once-green planet, leaving up the blowing sands its gigantic bones in grisly memory of what once had been. And here, among these empty monoliths, Thorne knew at last he had come to the end of the spaceman's trail. He would go no farther.

Well, for such as he it should not be unwelcome. He took his hand from the powdery wall and weakly shook his head. It was a tedious business, this dying.

What it was that drew him out of the shadow and down the slope he never knew. Perhaps it was the numb indifference of despair, perhaps only the last, momentary flicker of that indomitable curiosity which had drawn the Earthman adventuring across the world and now flings it light-years wide over the Solar System. It served, nevertheless, to draw him wearily down from the rubble beneath the gigantic tower into the low basin which had been the tight harbor of this long-gone city of Mars. Automatically he trudged onward,

to bring up presently before one of the low mounds dotting the harbor floor.

It had been a ship, he knew. What forgotten wood made up its mouldering bones to outlast the crumbling stone of its home port he did not know, nor greatly care. There had been so many great and wonderful things on Mars forgotten long since by the sad, wistful remnants of her dying peoples.

Lean, broken ribs thrust upward rudely through the golden sands, wooden-pegged planks still clinging forlornly to their splintered shafts. There had been metal, too . . . copper, bronze, iron bolts, and silver trim on the poop. All had long since been looted by the wandering desert tribes who wandered furtively through these tremendous monuments of their forgotten past.

From mound to mound Thorne trudged with a weary indifference. As well to die thus on his feet as face up in the sun. For die he must. Water there was none, and the only vegetation an occasional low death-bush with utter agony buried in its flat, leprous leaf-pads. A cluster of brilliant t'ang sprays glittered savagely in the shady lee of a shattered wreck, and Thorne shuddered.

Here, too, death crept in wait, a death already fastened fang-deep in his sodden, pain-wracked body from a score of dingy Vulhan t'ang-hells. But what odds? The death from those dark and crimson fruits was quick and terrible, perhaps, but only quicker than the fate already lying in his veins. Let there be an end, even to this aimless wandering.

Slowly Thorne walked up to the bush. There were many, growing in strange luxuriance along the dust-worn flanks of an ugly wreck half-buried in the sand. Other wrecks flanked it, three of them, lean, wicked skeletons of ancient Martian fighting ships, one with her broken prow yet buried in the freighter's bulging side. He touched the nearest plank and it drifted into powdered dust beneath his fingers, leaving a round hole in the grey wall. Again he put his hand through the ship's side. Another hole was puffed out as cleanly as by a dis-ray.

Curiosity stirred in him once more. Picking up a stone, he broke open the wreck's side, bring down the entire flank

in an almost soundless crash of powdering timbers and dissolving decks. The hold, pierced upon the farther side by the ram of the dead warship which had undoubtedly sunk the two of them, lay open to the sunlight, barred by the ragged shadows of the broken stern works.

"Jars," muttered Thorne. The hold had been packed to the deck with fat, yet not ungraceful clay jars eight feet high and three wide. He lurched through the opening he had made.

"Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," he mumbled. Maxfield Parrish jars, Oriental and sinister enough to have held a pair of the ancient robber band. He patted one, and weak though the blow was, the jar dissolved into drifting mist.

Thorne stared.

Preserving the graceful shape of the vanished jar, a beautiful block of some golden amber substance stood twinkling among its fellows. He pounded another jar. It, too, shuddered into misty dust, leaving its petrified contents, blazing like tawny fire in the Martian sun. Down the long row Thorne went, poking and kicking. Jar after jar dissolved, leaving a shimmering stack of solid amber blocks shaped with inhuman perfection to the mound of the clay in which for countless forgotten centuries they had been petrifying beneath the dying seas and deserts. Incredibly hard and smoother than glass, their sleek flanks ripped and gleamed, shimmering in the bars of sunlight slanting down through the rotted deck. But other than these, the ship lay bare and lifeless.

"Frozen oil," mumbled Thorne, turning away at last. Even had he been able to melt and eat the stuff, the thought of prolonging life had become insupportable. Weakly he stumbled toward the broken wall he had pushed in to enter. Here there was naught for him, but beyond, in the shadows, lay the deadly t'ang and its berries. Well, it had begun this ghastly Odyssey and it was fitting it should end it in the only way it could be ended.

He groped in the shadows for his spear. Lifting it, he thrust a plank into drifting dissolution, clearing a way out. For a moment, staring at the sunlight beyond the opening, he did not see. Then his eyes were drawn to the blade of his spear

as it sagged in his lax grasp, for, resting on the sand within the ship's overcast, it gleamed with a strange radiance. White fire blazed intermittently along its wide, polished blade.

THORNE FROWNED. He lifted the blade. In the sunlight the light dancing on his spear became white-hot, intolerable. He thrust it back into the shadows where a broken bit of deck overhung the ruined hold. A shattering blaze of cold, blue-white light blasted along the hammered steel, casting its eery radiance upon Thorne's bearded, dusty face in a wild dance of light and dark. It gleamed madly in his mad, staring eyes. It shook like flame in his trembling hands, then fell like a shooting star upon the dusty sands as the weapon sagged from his relaxing grip. Slowly Thorne pivoted, his wild eyes fixed in awed amaze upon the rows and heaps of amber jars lying in such glowing luster among the fallen wreckage of the deck he had shattered. Sunlight ran and danced mockingly along their smooth flanks, sparkled and blazed with a fierce glow upon curve and highlight. He dropped his eyes to the fallen spear, blazing like a meteor in the dusk, half-buried in the sand, then lifted them again to the fabulous wealth lying before him.

"Vadirrian oil!" he whispered, choking.

Steel-hard, imperishable, the few fragments of the ancient oil of the Vadirrian tree which had been such a common article of commerce in the olden days commanded today a price so astronomical men were made wealthy for life through the discovery of a mere pinhead scrap or drifting grain. Radio-activated through the ages by the action of Mar's inner core, it had come to mean salvation in scores of the terrible new plagues introduced among the planets by the advent of space-travel. There were perhaps no more than six to eight ounces in the hospitals of the entire Universe at the present time, worth over three hundred and sixty billion credits. Here, in perfect condition, lay sixty tons.

He had come into the desert seeking death and the release it brought; he had found fortune inestimable. The irony of his plight brought a wry, bitter smile to his cracked lips, for, after all, he could hardly be said to have been cheated of his



earlier aim. Fortune or none, death sat grinning at him from the broken timbers of the ancient ship, gleaming from the petrified oil still in its original shape from jars now dust and less than dust. Without food or water, he stood already dead and nothing here in the shadows could save him from the inexorable end he had so persistently sought.

Thorne stumbled from the freighter and stood once more in the hot, bright Martian sunlight. The giant tower of the deserted city loomed behind him, but he did not look that way. He stared a moment at the blade of his spear, faintly gleaming even in this bright glare, then all around him at the rolling desolation which had once been the proud, rich harbor of the great city now mouldering in silence along the powdered-quays behind him. There was no life.

Blindly he moved away, scuffing through the sand. The excitement of his find wore down and the gripping pangs of torment again seized and wrenched at him. Yet it was not with the same aimless shamble with which he had entered the sunken harbor bowl that he left it, but, instinctively, he found himself trying to follow his own plainly marked trail across the shallow sand hills. He might make it.

He did not, of course. Weakened and broken by his long, waterless march into the desert, sapped by his own excesses, he followed his trail for mile after mile until it blurred and spun before his eyes and melted at last into one blinding haze of flaming Martian heat. The trail vanished, though he did not know he had wandered from it. Presently he knew nothing but that, somehow, he must keep going on and on. Why, he could no longer remember, but the dim, instinctive urge was there and served to motivate him when he would have fallen to die with the others over whose mummies he more than once stumbled.

The hunger was the worst. The terrible ravages of t'ang had somewhat blunted his need for liquids, but he still could starve. Yet here and there upon his way he chanced on little bushes and clumps of plants, thick-leaved, leprous, yellow and blue and horrid purple, essence of poisonous death to all things Terrestrial or Martian.

Here and there, also, he encountered dried mummies or the skeletons of such weird Martian life as had succumbed to hunger and tasted the spiny death blooming across the desert sands. And there were t'ang bushes, heavy with the bright red and purple berries whose fermented juice had wrought him such deadly havoc. Thorne stared dully, conscious of the fitness of things which set these horrors blooming only in such fatal wastelands.

He moved on and on, his eyes aching to the ceaseless play and counterplay of mirages and kindred phantoms that swept the changing landscapes like magic lanterns. Again and again he found himself walking into the streets of a dead city, or perhaps one peopled by living beings. But even as his feet touched the cobbled walks the phantom dissolved and he plunged into a marsh that vanished as quickly when he bent to taste the water splashing about his torn feet. It was the final blow and he went down heavily and lay sprawled there on the powdery, dusty slope where no marsh had lain for ten thousand years.

**A**N HOUR LATER he wearily opened his eyes. The sun was lower, but the heat and pain had not lessened perceptibly. A hundred feet away a little copse of t'ang bushes flowered gracefully in thin sprays of twig and serried little fruit arching up and out like frozen fountains of death. Thick-leaved, monstrous cactus plants crouched in the scanty shade flung by the taller t'angs. Cruel rows of gleaming spines thrust outward belligerently, as though there were creatures even on waterless Mars mad enough to rend and tear their poisonous flesh for the pitiful moisture distilled from her lean breast. He grinned weakly and began crawling forward. Mirages, at least, need no longer haunt his wheeling brain.

He ate the plants. Stripping the t'ang bushes of their scarlet, bursting rows, he gobbled down the berries like peanuts. It no longer mattered that death salted the repast. But here, deep in the desert, the berries were dry and flat, insufficient for his need. Recklessly he tore open the broad-leaved plants at his feet, slicing and ripping their hideous flesh with his spear, and gulping great chunks of the dripping pulp as avidly as though he ate in silken



Kyra, the pleasure dome on Io. No plant escaped him.

He destroyed them all, eating what he would of their softer hearts. When he had wiped out the little group, he lurched onward to another, and another, sampling each and devouring many to their very roots. Although he had eaten enough pulped death to destroy a city, the counteraction of varying poisons neutralized each other for a while, but he could not go on forever.

Within an hour, as he stumbled on, revived for the moment by this foul repast, the pains struck him down as though by lightning, stiffening his weakened body from head to toe in a fiery spasm. A great ball of flame burst in his belly and spread scintillating all through his frame until he screamed aloud and made no sound in the doing, until he twitched and writhed no more, until he lay at last in the cooler shades of night . . . a limp, white thing across an ancient dune of Martian sand, one more thing for the quiet, dreaming desert to claim and softly fold away in her drifting dust with other remnants of the past.

**B**UT GEOFFREY THORNE was not of the past. That he was of the present, and not good, he became painfully aware some time later. There was a low humming, drumming roar in his ears, and the bed on which he lay vibrated softly. He did not open his eyes. Here was another mirage, and a cruel one. He had not thought to die dreaming of the old days when Geoffrey Thorne was among the great ones of the space-world. He lay in a rocket bunk—and the ship was in motion.

A hard, rough hand shook his shoulder. "Ye're awake, lad." The voice, like the hand, was hard, yet not unkind. It was strangely familiar and he opened his eyes. The grizzled face staring down at him broke into a short, choppy smile. "Easy lad, easy. Just lie still."

"Captain Fraser!" Thorne mumbled. "Joy Fraser . . . how . . . am I on your ship?"

"Sure, sure, Thorne." Fraser patted his shoulder. "Ye're on the *Moonfire*, an hour out of Vulhan City. I'll get ye to a hospital quick as I can."

"Hospital? What hospital? I feel—

ghaaaa!" Thorne fell back heavily, gagging, as he remembered the incredible miscellany he had been gnawing just before it had struck him down in agony. Death-agony, he had thought, but yet—apparently . . .

"Ye're ghostly, lad," rumbled the long-faced Scotchman, pushing down the impatient derelict. "Were ye lost long in the sand?"

"I don't know. A long time . . . a long . . . time . . ." Thorne lay still for a while, his hand over his eyes.

There was a strange, puzzled look in Fraser's eyes as he watched the man who had once been his friend. Jeff Thorne had been among the best of five worlds, and now . . .

"Could I get ye anything, lad?" he asked, gently. The other shook his head.

"I feel all right," he said, finally. "Dead-tired, but all right."

"Pumped water into ye," Fraser grinned. "Soaked ye in it. Ye lay in ma bath near five hours, out and all. Does wonders up here."

"You must have worked miracles, Joy," acknowledged Thorne, wonderingly. "What did you do? I know I was dying."

The rocket captain looked down, flushing miserably. He picked at a fleck on his purple tunic.

"Well, lad, you know . . . we hear things in the trade. I knew . . . you drank t'ang. So I remembered I had a bottle. Stuff in the armory for trading, ye remember. You had half a glass."

Thorne smiled wryly. "Yes? Thanks, Fraser. You took a risk, dispensing the stuff without a permit, but the patient—" His eyes widened and he came suddenly to his elbow, disregarding Fraser's attempt to thrust him down in the bunk again. "Half a glass, you said?"

"Sure, lad. That's all." He looked anxiously at the bearded derelict. "Ye don't mean it was too much?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Thorne waved aside the other's troubled protest, his brows knitting. He had had more than that before, but even to stronger men than himself such a dose meant stunned, broken stupor that might well last from two to four days. Yet he felt nothing.

"Fraser, when you found me, where was I?"

"Out cold on a sand-hill, lad. O'Leary spotted you from the engine room as we sailed by. Ye had a Martian spear . . . and something else I want to talk to you about later."

Thorne did not catch the other's meaning, but pressed on. "There was no city near?"

"City!" Fraser stared. "Ye mean . . . oh, ye mean a deserted city, eh? No, there was no city. No cities in those parts to my knowledge. Mirage country, ye know, lad. One o' them?"

"Could you remember—were there plants near me—Martian desert plants like cactus—maybe t'ang bushes?"

"Can't say, Thorne. None right near ye, anyhow. Just clear sand. Why?"

"Could you find the spot again?"

"Sure. Right in the log. Aimin' to go back?"

"Perhaps . . . some day. But you don't understand, Joy. Those plants . . . I had been eating them."

Fraser started back in horror, coming to his feet as his stool clattered across the smooth steel floor. "But my Lord, man . . . them things is fatal! One nibble and ye're a cooked goose!"

"I know. I've seen men who died that way, and I wanted to go out as quickly. I couldn't take it any more. But I ate everything—all colors and all the tastes you could find in your foulest nightmares. I even ate the t'ang berries. Am I dead?"

"Lord knows why you ain't, lad!"

"I know I ate the things, Joy. But that's not what I meant. Perhaps the things counteracted themselves in me, I ate so many. I meant the t'ang."

"You—it didn't affect you!" Fraser eyed his patient in growing astonishment. There were no indications Thorne had sopped up a heavy dose of the lethal drug.

"No. I feel nothing. Just like I'd had a good sleep, though I'm still worn out and weak. Dead tired and hungry, but I have no thirst. And my craving for the stuff is classic, Joy."

"I've heard that, lad." Fraser shook his head, remembering the wild tales.

"I don't want a drink, Joy!"

a derelict to the soles of his torn boots. Yet he did not want a drink, he whose passion had been drink, whose only joy and only thought had been drink until it had swept him from the heights to such depths that even a Martian refused longer to shelter him and sent him forth into the desert to find death.

"Maybe ye've just been numbed," suggested Fraser. "I gave ye half a glass, I told ye."

"It should have laid me out cold."

"Anyone else it would," returned Fraser, somewhat brutally. "You been lapping it up so thick you might be a little immune, ye know. I took the chance."

"It wouldn't have made any difference if I had been laid out another day or two, anyhow," Thorne returned, as brutally. "I might be getting a little thick. I could take more than I could at first. But I wanted it just as bad, or worse. Now I don't want it. Have you any left?"

"Most of the bottle."

"May I have a glass?"

Fraser snorted, his Scotch coming through almost visibly. "Don't want it, eh?" He pulled a squat, green bottle from the wall cabinet beside the bunk. "Just how big a glass, Mr. Thorne?"

"Full."

He filled the glass and handed it in stony silence to the ex-pilot. Thorne took it and looked into the turgid green depths. He smelled the sweet, cidery odor. He passed it to and fro under his nose. No reaction. Nothing.

"It's just water, Joy." He looked up at Fraser, wide-eyed, grinning.

"It's high-test Royal Seal," retorted the freighter captain. "It cost me plenty and you know it."

"Yes, but—to me—me, the biggest sot on Mars—it's just water! No taste, no smell, no nothing." He lifted the glass to his lips. There was a short pause. Slowly he lowered his hand, a glare of madness in his eyes. Fraser drew back, but, fascinated, made no effect to interfere.

"It's still . . . water, Joy. Water. Tastes like water, smells like water. The stuff doesn't affect me at all." He flung up his hand, gulping down the terrible t'ang like mad, spilling it down his stubby chin and staining his rags a dirtier color than before. Only when the last drop had

**T**HORNE STRUGGLED to a seat on the edge of the bunk, unshaven, his hair brush-wild, his eyes red and rheumy,

vanished did he lower the glass, and Fraser, watching in amazement, saw that no tinge of exhilaration swayed his patient. A thimblefull of the stuff would set off a jag in an ordinary man that made a whiskey-drunk look like an ice-cream festival. Thorne, saturated with the wicked juice, sat in quiet, deliberate possession of his every sense and faculty.

"I've had my drink, Joy. I didn't want it, except as I would want any drink when thirsty. I didn't taste a thing. I feel nothing." He stumbled erect, holding onto the upright of the bunk. "I'm tired, dead-tired. I could sleep a week. But I'm not drunk, Joy. I'm not drunk. I can't get drunk. Never again. I can't be poisoned. I'm saturated with poison. You'll have to shoot me to get rid of me, Joy."

"We don't want to get rid of you, Jeff." There were unaccustomed lines in the freighter captain's face and a softness which had not been there since he bade goodby to his children back on Earth five months ago. "We've hated to lose you. And now you're back again, you want us to shoot you!"

Their hands met and wrung hard together. "Welcome back!" It was a pleasant thing for the derelict Thorne to hear once more. But he knew.

"I can't come back, Joy, though I thank you. I'm a t'ang drinker and, as such, I lose all rights."

"You're cured, man! You've proved that. You're alive! The berries and leaves you ate destroyed your craving. We can prove it in any court of law, any space commission. Drink a barrel of the stuff in their faces."

"Perhaps I'm cured. I think so now, but there may be a relapse. Anyhow, cured or not, there's a strict law on the books and it isn't going to be lifted to allow me to return to Earth or any of the Lines. Too many aren't cured."

Fraser scowled. "You are. What about the others? Can't they—?"

"Do I know what I ate? The proportions? What went with what and how much? I was dizzy as a loon. All I really remember clearly is eating t'ang berries. Deadly poison. Can a cure be mixed with ingredients like that?"

Fraser was not daunted. "Perhaps you can't force the law, Thorne. But you do know what cured you. Work out a cure.

Get the botanists and biologists on it, man. Let them do the work, if it is your clue. Flying isn't the only thing in life, Jeff."

"Do I look like a fountain, to start research on the course, Joy?" Thorne surveyed his rags in a spotted mirror on the wall of the freighter's little surgery. "I look like the subject matter."

"You can do anything with money, lad."

"And do I look like money, Joy?"

"Not at present, of course. But when we reach Vulhan City, you can look as you like. Ye're wealthy, lad. Wealthier than Donaldson o' the Line."

"Which of us has been drinking the t'ang, Joy?"

"This is no dream, pipe or any other kind, Jeff." The captain held up a small, broken sliver of iridescent golden amber, clamped in a leaden grip, which he had taken from the cabinet as Thorne jeered. "I think you'll find it worth about one hundred and seventy thousand, lad. One hundred and seventy thousand. Think it over. Ye had it caught in your clothes when we found ye."

MARTINEAU, Captain of the Port at Vulhan City, snapped the inter-office switch in impatience. His voice cracked sharply. "I will not see Captain Thorne, Miss Gurn. You know that as well as I do! You hear?"

Miss Gurn's voice was tremulous, but determined. "I know, sir, but he insists on seeing you. It is—"

"Have Williams throw him out, Miss Gurn," snapped the Port Captain. "How in Karac's name did you let him in, anyway?"

"He says it is Government business, sir. He refuses to go. And Lieutenant Williams is not here."

"Government business?" Martineau glowered. "Then send him in. I'll deal with this t'anger myself." Snapping off the phone switch, he slipped another. The local Patrol Superintendent looked up at him in the screen. "Bannerman, could you step in a moment? I think Thorne's going to make trouble and I'm going to deal with him right here and now."

"Of course, Martineau. I've been expecting him." The big, white-haired officer heaved himself up and picked up his glittering helmet. "Be right in." The screen faded as Thorne was ushered in

by a wide-eyed Miss Gurn.

Trim and stiffly neat in the scarlet tunic and blue-black trousers of the International, Thorne stood coolly at attention, thin and worn but clean-shaven, scrubbed, and pressed. Gold sparkled on his close-fitting helmet and on the butts of his twin Blandarcs. Under one scarlet arm he carried a small black box.

"Well, Thorne," broke in Martineau as the other door opened to admit the bulk of the Patrol Superintendent. "Your business, please."

Thorne flushed, but did not move. He could not afford to resent discourtesies he had become so bitterly accustomed to receiving these past two years. He laid the box on the Port Captain's desk.

"This is to return to Earth at once, sir. It is extraordinarily valuable. I am requesting passage on the first battle rocket leaving Mars."

The Patrolman intervened quietly. "You know you cannot return to Earth, Captain Thorne."

"I know, sir. I request passage for this consignment only."

"What is it . . . t'ang?" Martineau asked, brutally, pushing roughly at the box.

A grim smile touched Thorne's dry lips. "No, sir. It is a little over an ounce of—petrified Vadirrian oil!"

Martineau leaped erect with a strangled cry, his face going crimson with anger. The Superintendent, having known what was in the box, made no sound but watched them with a grim smile.

"If this is a joke, you bush-bum," choked the Port Captain, "I'll see personally you suffer for it, Thorne. The hard way. You dare come here and—"

"It is not a joke, sir," broke in Bannerman, at last. "We have been notified of this strike. It is registered in our files and the specimen is entirely genuine. I recommend that Captain Thorne's request be fulfilled." His voice was crisp and clear.

Martineau sagged, staring at the little box. "But—but there's a fortune there, sir. Thousand on thousands—where did this—this man locate such a treasure? The Martian government has been notified?"

"All necessary steps have been taken, sir," Thorne smiled. "The declared value of this specimen is one hundred and eighty-

two thousand credits. Proper amounts have been forwarded to the Vulhan General Hospital, with others to Loxthal City, Andobre, Vlux, and New Luna. This is directed to the Universal Laboratories at New Yatt, North America, vested in the name of Miss Helen Thurland."

"You make no claim to accompanying it?"

"None, sir. I am cured of t'ang, but there is no known medical way to prove that to anyone's satisfaction but my own. I know the law and am willing to abide by it. I claim its protection in this matter."

"Fair enough, Captain Thorne," agreed Martineau, reluctantly, seating himself and poking gingerly at the fortune on his desk. "You have that right."

"You accept the shipment?"

"It shall be sent on the *Warhorse* next Thursday, by way of Luna. Here is your receipt and your insurance papers. Present them to the Starmail office next week and receive your arrival receipt. About the twentieth, I believe."

"What is the charge?"

Bannerman quietly intervened. "There is no charge. The Vadirrian is for the Universals, and as such travels light."

Thorne bowed stiffly, as Martians do, and stepped back. "I thank you, gentlemen. I know the Vadirrian is in good hands."

Bannerman heaved himself up. "Step into my office a moment, will you, Thorne? If the Captain will excuse us?" Martineau nodded, saluting sharply. There was no more talk of "bush-bums".

The Superintendent of Patrol, however, was not impressed. Seated at his own desk, he pinned Thorne with an eagle glare. "I don't ask for information, Captain Thorne, but I must request you to show cause why you should not be removed from Vulhan City as a t'anger and—uh—general undesirable."

"I am cured of the t'ang habit, sir. So far as medical authority here can go, they give me a clean bill of health. I have wittnesses, pictures, papers."

**B**ANNERMAN SNORTED. "If I take so much for granted, and, mark you, I have no right to assume that out of hundreds you alone have managed to cure yourself. Medics or no, I must still

ask what means of subsistence you have. We cannot tolerate relief cases here on Mars, Captain," he added, sternly.

A dull red flush stained Thorne's worn features. "I have never been on your rolls, sir."

"Granted. But can you keep off them? Do you have a job?"

"Who will hire me now?"

"Have you money?"

"All I possess lies on Captain Martineau's desk yonder, sir. When I found I had unwittingly carried off a scrap of the petrified oil in my torn boot, I felt I had no true right to it under the circumstances in which I made the discovery."

"Highly commendable," rasped Bannerman, rubbing his chin in exasperation. "Didn't you think it would leave you as flat as you have been the last year or so, man? What shall you live on? Will you go back to the natives, shaming us all?"

"They are good people, sir. I could do worse."

"You could, by hang! And have, sir! You have no hope of relocating the main bulk of this treasure?"

"None, sir. It was in the mirage country, you know, and I have nothing to search even plain and simple desert, let alone that weird district. Perhaps some day I may be able to push my claim and make up an expedition."

"And until that time . . ."

"With your permission, sir, I should like to write a letter to accompany the Vadirrian. Then . . . I shall go home."

"Home?"

"My . . . beach home, sir, I have considerable property fronting on the Nergal Sea, you know. As far as I care to walk," he added with some bitterness.

Bannerman shrugged. "Public property, Thorne. There are pens and paper there. I'll see your letter off with the box."

"Thank you, sir."

But, pen in hand, Thorne sat staring into space, nibbling thoughtfully at the tip. It was not easy. Finally, he began to write, slowly, awkwardly forming the letters he had not shaped for two years and more. But, presently, warming to the unaccustomed task, they came more easily and the pen scratched briskly in the silent office. Bannerman buried himself in his paper work, ignoring the visitor at the other table.

Dear Miss Thurland,

You will remember me, I think, even if only as a poor space-bum dragged by the heels from the Nergal Sea, on Mars, just outside Vulhan City. You were kind to give me money, twenty credits.

You may remember I told you the money would be for t'ang. It wasn't, however, nor has it been spent at all. You showed me what I was, Miss Thurland, and I didn't like the picture.

Notice of receipt will come to you, perhaps before this letter, that a parcel has been deposited in your name at the Foundation in New Yatt. It is the fortune I found in the desert. I know you would not accept such a gift from me, so please believe me I do not intend it as a gift, nor even as a payment for the credits you gave me. One cannot repay things like that, even with the parcel at the Foundation.

It is pure Vadirrian oil, petrified, valued at more than one hundred and eighty thousand credits. I am sure you realize how valuable, far more than in mere credits, this find can be. It will give new life to hundreds of stricken people suffering the strange disease we transmit between the planets with this new commerce.

You spoke of my ex-steward, Nancy Bertrand. We can do nothing for her now, buried on Io, but because you were her friend, I would ask you to set up the fund as a memorial to her, to train nurses and stewards for the space-runs and to insure that girls as fine as she are given the chance she made for herself to go out into the world and do work as important as hers. I know that is not too much to ask of you, Miss Thurland. Your own expenses for the transaction are included in the fund. Because I may not return to Earth, now or ever, I have taken the liberty of imposing this bequest on you, knowing that, as you loved Nancy, it will give you pleasure to insure her some fitting memorial.

Any reply will reach me if addressed to Captain B. Bannerman, Superintendent of Patrol, Vulhan City, Mars. Again, let me thank you. My life is worth little to myself or others, but you gave me back my self-respect.

I shall hope to see you again one day, should you visit beyond the moon.

Sincerely,  
Geoffrey Thorne

**A**N HOUR or so later, Vulhan City only a dim glow of light in the evening sky behind him, Thorne was walking quietly along the beach.

There was someone waiting for him on the low headland beyond which lay his own particular cove where he had spent so much and so unworthily the time lying heavily on his hands.

The Martian, Hanu, his grizzled whiskers blowing about his wizened, elfish face stood alone, an armed man.

"I have returned, Hanu."

"It was not to return you left this cove," the Martian replied, sternly. His great round eyes were fixed on the other.

"My debt is paid, Hanu."

"Money will not repay. Can your gold buy back your honor, or ours?"

"I did not repay in gold, friend, but in the golden oil your ancestors left us all—the Vadirrian. I bought opportunity and happiness for many others with its price. For myself, you see me as I am. I have nothing else. I return as I left, a derelict."

A slow, wise smile crept over the Martian's wrinkled monkey-face. He pulled at his whiskers. Then he linked arms with the ex-pilot. "Come, friend Thorne. You have paid the debt. Let us go down to the village and see what the women have laid for the evening meal. We shall welcome you. . . ."

## PS's Feature Flash

### FIRST POST-WAR CONVENTION!

**"SCIENCE WILL NEVER OVERTAKE FICTION," ASSERT FANS AT SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION!**

"Science fiction is the blue-print of man's imagination, and, since every new invention is the springboard of greater ideas, science will never overtake science-fiction." That statement summed up the opinions of 107 science fiction fans, writers and editors who jammed Newark, New Jersey's Slovak Sokol Hall, Sunday, March 3, 1946, to participate in THE FIRST EAST-ERN POST-WAR SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION.

Dr. A. Langley Searles, Instructor of Chemistry at New York University and publisher of the leading fantasy-collecting magazine, touched off the discussion with a prepared talk in which he maintained: "Why, a pulp writer finds the imaginary thing he writes about has been invented between the time he mails the manuscript and the day it appears in print."

In reply, David M. Speaker, important research man on Radar, and old-time writer of science-fiction, cited the day when a television story was considered science-fiction, and the great progress made in imaginative plots since then.

F. Orlin Tremaine, editor and writer of science-fiction felt that the area between the eyes and the ears, the brain, was a vast unexplored field for imaginative writers.

The feature address of the day was delivered by L. Sprague de Camp, distinguished author of many fine fantasy books, on the subject:

"Lost Continents, Real and Otherwise." With a background of indefatigable research, De Camp exploded the various myths of Atlantis, Lemuria, Mu, etc., finally concluding that the existence of a past, lost civilization, was a doubtful thing at best.

Sam Moskowitz, chairman of the convention, eulogized Walter Sullivan, science-fiction fan who died heroically in line of duty, as a symbol of all the boys who would never again attend a science-fiction convention. The assembly rose a moment in their memory.

Among the many well known figures introduced were C. A. Brandt, oldest known science-fiction fan, formerly editor of the first science-fiction magazine; Robert Arthur, Jr., successful fantasy author who has made a reputation as a writer of radio scripts; Manly Wade Wellman, fantasy author who beat detective-story writers at their own game by winning \$2,000 for the most original detective story of 1945; Sam Merwin, Jr., jovial science-fiction editor and writer who was elated at meeting so many of the fans; and many, many others.

Fans came in groups—Tom Hadley, Providence, R. I., enthusiast driving down four in his Lincoln-Zephyr, The Philadelphia Science-Fiction Society turning out a delegation of 14, The Brooklyn Utopians with seven members, the Futurians headed by Donald A. Wollheim, successful anthropologist, bringing a large representation.

The convention was sponsored by the A (NULL A) MEN, Northern New Jersey fan club, and inveterate "Planet" fans Geo. R. Fox and Joe Kennedy were important men on the convention committee.

The convention adjourned to an auction of original science-fiction illustrations, rare books and magazines, and much gabbing.

When William Baring-Gould of the "Time" business staff was asked whether this convention jibed with past flippant press reports he replied in the negative and echoed the sentiments of all when he said: "This convention is a great success!"

—SAM MOSKOWITZ.



# Total Recall

By LARRY STERNIG

Buried under layers of horror in the old scientist's brain was the only thing that could save the System—and Roger Kay had exactly half an hour to dig it out!



*"Shh," said Roger gently. "Watch." He drew her to the screen.*

THE face of Brian Wargan, chief of the Solar Bureau of Investigation, was gray with strain and fatigue.

"This Corvo North business," he said, "It's almost a myth by now, but it's our only chance. We might as well face that."

His features and that of the younger



man across the desk from him might have formed a study in contrasts. Roger Kay was keen, alert. There were signs of weariness about his eyes, but the firm set of his jaw revealed a tendency to action rather than introspection.

"Then, sir," he urged, "let's take that chance. The department has located him, I believe? I haven't seen the reports."

The S. B. I. chief nodded. "His laboratory is right here on Gany." He indicated a spot on the global map of Ganymede, some distance from the spaceport.

"That's the mining district," Kay observed.

"Yes. He's been doing some research for the Inter-Planetary Mining Syndicate. We've assigned a special wave band and are in constant communication. Here, I'll introduce you."

Wargan set the dials on the visi-communicator that occupied one corner of his desk; then looked up at the screen on the wall. A blurred rectangle of light flickered and then coalesced into sharpness—and Roger Kay involuntarily drew a deep breath. The girl looking out from the visiscreen was the most beautiful he'd ever seen.

"Is your father making progress, Miss North?" asked Wargan.

The girl in the screen shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Wargan. He's in the lab now, working, and won't let me disturb him except to bring in coffee and sandwiches. I've been trying to get him to sleep."

"This is Roger Kay, Miss North," said the S. B. I. chief. "One of my assistants. I'm sending him out to your place to see if he can help."

Ann North frowned slightly. "We're doing everything we possibly can already."

"I'm sure of that. But Mr. Kay is rather outstanding as a scientist himself, Miss North. He'll be able to help—at least in some of the detail work, to save time."

Roger Kay grinned. "He means, Miss North, that I can clean the test tubes and solder the wires and let your father save his energy for the brain-work."

His smile was infectious, and the scientist's daughter capitulated. Wargan flicked the switch and threw the screen into blankness.

"I'll give you an order for the fastest helio we have," he said. "You'll be there

in three hours. And that means there will be a little less than three days left!"

Roger Kay drew a deep breath, his face suddenly serious. Three days to save the System from an invasion that could not possibly prove to be less than a major catastrophe, less than the end of things as he knew them.

**E**VEN now the invaders from Andromeda were approaching the System's outermost defenses; converging upon the virtually helpless garrisons on Pluto. Patrol spacers off the frigid planet had already contacted spearheads of the huge armada—with fatal results.

Once before the System had been periled by these devils from the distant galaxy. Victory had been costly then, but the combined Planetary fleets could not now hope to stave off the full force on this new attack. They would have to yield space; fall back to more favorable positions.

Trionite alone would prove the decisive factor in any war of worlds, and the United Planets had not been able to learn the secret of manufacturing the new explosive, one ton of which could wreck an invading army.

As Roger Kay set the robot-course dial of his speedy helio for the mining settlement, he switched in for a moment on Wargan's private wave-band. "Leaving now, sir," he reported crisply. "Be there in two hours. Any further instructions?"

"Do your best, Kay, that's all," came the weary voice of the S. B. I. chief. "New reports in confirm the old ones. We expect the first blow by noon Friday. Pluto is doomed; now being evacuated."

"We've got to stop them," Roger Kay said fiercely as he snapped the switch. "We've just got to!"

He settled back to get in a much-needed two hours of sleep while the robot pilot held his course.

The alarm bell awakened him, and he pointed the craft down under the great red disk of Big Jupe, toward the low range of purple cliffs indicated on his map.

A few minutes later he was knocking at the door of the dome-shaped laboratory.

Ann North was twice as beautiful in the flesh as she had seemed on the visi-screen. Attired in the modish shorts and tunic that had become universal garb for Earthwomen, she looked like a figure from a

Grecian frieze. She led him to the library.

"Dad's asleep at last," she said. "I persuaded him to rest for a few hours—on the strength of my argument that he'd accomplish more in the long run if he kept his brain clear."

Roger Kay nodded understandingly. "I just had a bit of sleep myself en route. Nobody at headquarters has slept much the last few days. By the way, I'm woefully in the dark about a lot of things. Will you tell me just what your father's trying to re-discover? If you can enlighten me, I'll not have to ask him so many darn-fool questions."

"You know, of course," said Ann North when they were comfortably seated, "that it's a ray that will explode any explosive at a distance. Or perhaps I shouldn't have said a ray—it's really a sound wave, in the ultra-sonic belt, traveling on a beam. It disrupts any unstable chemical compound."

Roger Kay nodded. "That much I know. I've examined one of the projectors. We've installed them at all the outposts. They're all ready, except—"

"Except for the catalyst. The part of the discovery that's lost in the chemical compound that produces the catalytic gas. The ultra-sonic waves, passing through the gas, change their vibration in some way."

"I see now," said Kay, "why it is directional. The ultra-sonic waves go in all directions, of course, but only those passing through the gas are disruptive. Right?"

The girl nodded her beautiful blond head. "It's all very simple, and it's all in the hands of the government, except for the formula for that catalyst. Fortunately my father has a reputation as a scientist. That's why the government was willing to take a chance on having those projectors set up, even though—"

Roger Kay smiled wryly. "Your father is the outstanding scientist of the System, Miss North. But even if he wasn't, we might have taken that chance. It's about the only chance. If he fails, three days from today—"

"As bad as that?"

"I'm afraid so. But let's not talk about it. One thing I don't know: How was the formula lost?"

"Dad destroyed it. He discovered it accidentally twenty years ago, while working on something else. Never thinking

that the fate of worlds might hinge upon it, he destroyed his notes almost as soon as he had made them. He's always been awfully opposed to war, you know, and he saw the terrible possibilities in the weapon if it should fall into the wrong hands."

"That is still true," said a quiet voice from the doorway. Roger Kay recognized Corvo North at once from the many photographs he had seen. He rose and offered his hand.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Kay," said the scientist. "Ann told me you were coming. Yes, it's still true that I'm opposed to war—but this isn't war. Even disregarding personal interests and patriotism, it's an attempt to save the human race. Come on into the laboratory. We've no time to waste."

ROGER whistled softly under his breath as Corvo North closed the door behind them. The laboratory, spacious and well equipped, was a research worker's dream.

The scientist led the way past rows of pieces of apparatus whose purpose Roger could but dimly guess, to a table at the far end of the room. Upon the table was a small box bristling with dials. The back and top were open, showing a maze of wires and coils and condensers.

"Looks like a radio set with hydrophobia," Roger observed. "What connection has this with the catalyst formula?"

"Nothing, directly. There's no chance, through experimentation, of my recovering that formula in time. Three years, possibly. Three days, never."

"You mean that it's hopeless to try? That the System is lost?" Roger Kay was appalled.

"I don't quite mean that," said North. "But what chance there is lies through this apparatus you're looking at now. Sit down; I'll explain while I work. You can help later, when I've explained the machine."

He began to tinker amidst the maze of wires.

"My discovery of trionite was purely accidental. It was empiric; not based on any theory. There were six or seven chemicals, and I recall the identity of only two of them. The others? Well, count the chemicals in the pharmacopoeia! The only way

I could re-discover it would be by accident as I did before—and that would involve too many experiments and too much time. But the formula is buried somewhere in my subconscious mind. I *might* remember it."

Roger Kay eyed the box with some misgivings. "You mean this is—"

"The memory of everything we've ever done or seen is latent in our minds—in the molecular structure of the brain.. Almost, I might say, in concentric layers. When the present crisis arose, I had been studying the human brain and the nature of thought and memory. Do you follow me?"

He looked up from his work and as Roger nodded, he saw how haggard and weary was the face of the elderly scientist.

"Consciousness is basically electrical in nature. The act of memory is the shift of that electrical impulse back to a buried stratum of the brain. But the shift is never complete; most of the consciousness stays in the present. We never remember anything perfectly."

"Then this machine is to—"

"To create a magnetic field of such a nature as to shift the consciousness *as a whole*. By shifting the magnetic field's intensity, I can move back the consciousness, or memory, to complete remembrance of any given moment of the past. In other words, under its influence, I hope to send back my memory to the moment when I jotted down the formula. Earlier or later won't do; I didn't memorize it at any time."

His interest completely gripped, Roger Kay stared into the intricate mechanism. "But, sir," he asked, "do you know the exact time that was—down to the minute?"

"Fortunately, yes. I recall that it was the day Ann was being given a party for her third birthday. My wife had told me to be home at three o'clock in the afternoon. I was a little late—didn't leave the lab until on the stroke of three, and it was two or three minutes before then that I wrote down the formula."

"And you think you can hit that exact moment?"

"With a couple of preliminary experiments, yes. If I find that given setting of the dial and the vernier adjustments give me a certain date and time of day, I can

calculate the proper adjustment for the time I want."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Roger. "Frankly, if it weren't for the wonderful things you've accomplished in other fields, I'd say it was visionary."

Corvo North shook his gray head. "The theory is sound; it should work. But three days! Man, we're working against a deadly deadline!" He grabbed a pad and pencil. "Here, I'll show you what to do and you can start on the headpiece that connects to the machine here."

AND thus started the busiest, dizziest hours of Roger Kay's life. Sleep was a chimera that haunted every leaden-eyed hour, a mirage that beckoned and pleaded in vain.

And the hands of the laboratory clock crept inexorably onward. At three in the morning on Friday, Terran time, with nine hours left before the invaders would strike, Kay staggered to the televis and dialed Wargan.

"I think we'll finish in time," he reported. "We'll be ready for the first test in a couple of hours. Have you made the preparations we suggested?"

The S.B.I. chief nodded. "At the base of each projector we've installed practically a chemical warehouse. There is at least a small quantity of every available known chemical. And expert chemists waiting at each."

"Good. Then within fifteen minutes after I send you the formula, the projectors can be in operation?"

"Ten minutes, unless the formula is more complex than you believe. You say that Corvo North believes there are but six or seven ingredients?"

Roger Kay nodded wearily. "And the communications?"

"Open constantly. An operator on duty at each projector at all times. Test messages going through every fifteen minutes. Incidentally, latest reports still confirm early ones. The deadline is still noon today."

Roger Kay saluted, then snapped the switch. Back to work at the little box in the laboratory.

During those last hours, as well as the ones preceding them, Ann North had been a ministering angel. Sleeping almost as

little as the two men, she was ever ready with encouragement—and hot coffee. At times, almost by force, she would pry one or the other of them away from their work for a brief period of rest.

On her own initiative she had called in Dr. Dane. Once he understood the situation, the doctor was invaluable. He took no part in the work on the machine, but he watched over Corvo North constantly and kept him at the highest point of efficiency under the circumstances.

Ten o'clock came—and ten-thirty—and they were ready for the preliminary test.

As he placed the metal plates on his head with shaking hands, Corvo North seemed a mere shell of his former self.

Roger Kay sat at the controls. At North's instructions they ran the wires to an easy chair several yards away, as they were uncertain just how far the magnetic field would extend beyond the headset.

"Better tie me to the chair," North cautioned. "When the field is thrown on, I'll have no recollection of the present or why I'm here. Don't forget that. Until you bring me back by setting the dials to zero, mentally, I'll be back where I was whatever time we hit upon. It will seem to me that I'm waking suddenly in utterly strange circumstances and surroundings. You know what questions to ask, of course."

"Yes, Mr. North," said Roger. He turned to Dr. Dane. "Will you attend to the tying? Just sufficiently so that he can't rise in his bewilderment."

Ann North brought straps, and a few moments later Corvo North nodded that he was ready; then leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

Roger Kay glanced at the instruments and then shifted two of the dials. There was a sudden hum from within the box, and Corvo North's eyes snapped open.

"What—what is this?" he demanded. "Why am I here?"

"Everything's all right, Mr. North," said Roger soothingly. "We'll release you in a moment. First please tell us what is the date."

"It's January twelfth, of course. Why do you—"

"And the year?"

"Twenty forty-five. Now will you kindly—"

"Just one more question, Mr. North. Do you know the exact time of day when you awoke here?"

"How can I when I don't know how I got here? The last thing I remember is walking through the door of the bank to keep my appointment, at nine. What's happened? Did I faint?"

A glow of satisfaction lodged itself in Roger's mind; they were getting the time more accurately than he'd dared expect on the first trial. He pushed his luck a bit farther.

"Were you on time to make that appointment, Mr. North?"

"I'd have been five minutes early. Now will you—"

"Perfect!" exclaimed Roger. He turned back the dials.

Corvo North went limp for an instant, then reopened his eyes. Dr. Dane rushed to him and unbuckled the straps.

"Get anything?" asked the scientist weakly.

"Perfect!" said Roger again. "I've got a note of the exact setting—and you were able to give the time exactly." He scribbled hasty calculations on the pad. "And that setting took you back to January of Twenty forty-five. To be exact—six thousand seven hundred twenty-eight, twenty-seven hours, seven minutes!"

Corvo North nodded weakly, but excitedly tried to rise. Dr. Dane, his hand on North's pulse, motioned him back.

"That was a tremendous strain on your heart, North," he cautioned. "I forbid you to do it again until you've rested."

"Absurd!" Corvo North glanced at the clock. "There isn't time! It's eleven now!"

"Repeat that again right away and you'll never live to report what you see," warned the physician solemnly. "Half an hour of rest—or the entire experiment will be in vain."

ANN NORTH'S face was pale; she looked from her father to Roger Kay pleadingly.

He nodded slowly. "We can just do it. I'll check and recheck the calculations meanwhile—get the dial settings exact. And the next try— Well, it's make or break anyway." His voice was grim. "One more chance, and we get it or we don't."

During that half hour he checked and

counter-checked his figures until he was as sure as possible to hit the exact instant in the past—the instant when Corvo North had jotted down the lost formula.

At eleven-thirty, the headset was replaced on Corvo North's head. This time his arms were left free and a pad of paper placed on his lap. His fingers held a pencil. He leaned back and again closed his eyes.

Roger Kay turned the dials.

Corvo North's face tensed, then relaxed. His eyes remained closed. For a half minute, aside from the faint hum from the machine, there was utter stark silence in the laboratory. It was maddening.

Then a faint scratching sound. The others, holding their breath from sheer suspense, saw the pencil in Corvo North's hand begin to move across the pad. Three lines it wrote; stopped.

The formula!

**S**UDDENLY the scientist's eyes snapped opened, widened with terror and bewilderment. With a movement so swift that no one could stop him, he ripped the sheet of paper from the pad, crumpled it, and hurled it at the glowing coil of an electric heater!

The paper flashed into flame, crumpled into ash as Corvo North himself crumpled, went limp in the chair.

Roger Kay turned the dials back to zero as Ann and the doctor leaped forward, unstrapped the unconscious scientist. Dr. Dane felt the fluttering pulse, then picked up the frail body and headed for the living quarters. Ann, her blue eyes wide with anxiety, ran ahead to open doors and prepare for the doctor's ministrations.

When she returned, Roger Kay stood

before the visi-screen. Ann put a hand on his shoulder. "Dad will be all right," she said, her voice flat with despair, "but we've failed. Dr. Dane says it will be days before he'd dare—"

"Shh," said Roger gently. "Watch." He slipped his left arm around her slim waist, drew to toward the screen.

The vista past the purple range showed at once that the view was eastward from the spaceport. There was no shipping in sight. In the red sky, far out and very high, was a thin silvery line, growing larger.

"The invaders." Unconsciously, Roger Kay whispered rather than spoke. "A thousand spheres at least for us alone. Watch, in a moment we'll know."

"Know what, Roger? Do you mean—"

The visi-screen answered for him. Out there high up in the sky there was a single bright flash—and then a thousand flashes that blended into one blinding one. A roar from the receiver rose to deafening pitch, stopped abruptly.

"Shattered the diaphragm of the transmitter," said Roger quietly. "That was trionite in action, Ann, it's all over. Your father—won!"

"But the formula! He destroyed it!"

Roger Kay put his other arm about her, smiled down. "That was why I was sent here, Ann. To eliminate possible hitches."

"But how—"

"Your father destroyed the formula the first time, and I guessed he might do it again—in his mind he was back some twenty years ago, remember—so I took the elementary precaution of placing carbon paper between the third and fourth sheets of that pad of paper. And I sent Wargan the formula while you were with your father, twelve minutes ago."



# Through The Asteroids —To Hell!

BY LEROY YERXA



*Instinctively he grasped her and held her tightly against him.*

Blair Freedman had torn that tunnel through the grinding asteroid wall—with the mighty Cutter . . . he'd die readily enough now to keep it open—but not with the girl he loved!

**B**LAIR FREEDMAN pushed the jet control slightly, sending the X-26 into a wide slow arc toward the asteroid tunnel. He sighed and glanced at the chart on the desk. Trip number seven thou-

sand twenty-two. For the rest of his life. "Come over here, Jerry," he called.

Jerry Graham, short, slight of figure, smiled and left the navigation desk. Graham's face was black where his razor had



left heavy hair just below the surface of the skin. His smile was mild and the brown eyes behind heavy spectacles were gentle.

"What is it, Blair?"

He stood beside Freedman, watching the solid, moving wall of the asteroid belt.

Blair Freedman sighed.

"Did you ever have the urge to deliberately miss the entrance of the tunnel? To hit full on against the asteroids?"

Graham stiffened, feeling ice water sluice suddenly into his veins.

"Are you nuts?"

Freedman relaxed. His grip on the control lever became lighter, more expert.

"No," he said slowly. "No, I'm okay. For a minute I was crazy, I guess. That's why I called you."

Graham studied the face of the younger man. Freedman was tall, rather slim. Graham could never decide just what made Blair Freedman attractive to the opposite sex, unless the secret lay in his deep, gray eyes and that shock of alarmingly red hair.

"I don't get it," he said. "Sure, the old routine gets tiresome. But it's a job and someone has to do it. We can't *all* be in the Warrior Patrol."

Freedman had seemingly come to his senses now. He sent the ship straight at the dark maw of the tunnel, flashed his colors to the guard ship that hovered near the entrance with its big guns trained on him, and then they were in the darkness.

The brilliant lamps of the X-26 sent splashes of light along the walls. Blair Freedman shuddered.

"Walls," he said idly. "Walls of twisting, gyrating death. I wonder what really happens when a ship hits them?"

He was talking half to himself, but Graham shuddered. Blair Freedman needed a rest, he decided. Needed to straighten himself out with the world.

"You'd be torn to dust in ten seconds," he said. "That is, if you weren't riding in the Cutter."

The Cutter was the huge ship designed by Planet Control, to keep the asteroid tunnel open.

Freedman nodded.

"And that's *another* thing I've got on my mind."

Graham wanted him to talk, until all the bitterness was out of him.

"What's another thing?"

They were deep in the tunnel now. Graham's eyes checked the mileage. Fifteen miles in. Ten minutes before they would see light again.

Blair Freedman said, "I'm damned tired of running that ploughhorse. Pete Folley's got to get another man for the job. I'm quitting."

Both men continued to look straight ahead. Freedman kept his eyes on the controls. He had said it now. Said what he had wanted to say for a month. A war was coming. He wanted "out" from the tunnel patrol. He was good enough for the warrior ships. He wanted to fly them. Get out into space where there was excitement, and a chance to show that he was ready for something better.

"Look here, Blair," Graham said slowly. He had a helluva lump in his throat. He felt lost. "Me, I'm not fit for the service. Too old. I couldn't fly in here with anyone else. We been a team for years. You can't . . ."

Freedman interrupted.

"I thought it all out, Jerry. You haven't got the confidence because you've never had to do the work. You've leaned on me. You can handle this ship *and* the Cutter. Folley will never fire you."

A speedy luxury ship swished past them, coming from the opposite end of the tunnel. There was light far ahead.

"I dunno," Graham said hesitantly. "You made up your mind? You're leaving for sure?"

Freedman took a deep breath.

"I'm leaving," he said.

Graham turned and went back slowly to the navigation desk. He was acting like a damned fool, he knew. Still, losing Blair was like losing your arm, losing part of your brain and soul. He sat down and tried to study the mapping sheets.

The figures and lines jumped up and blurred his eyes. Cautiously, so Blair Freedman wouldn't see, he lifted his specs and rubbed a hand across his eyes.

"Dammit," he said suddenly in a furious voice. "Go on then, and be cussed. Sure I can fly alone. You can go to hell and see if I care."

Freedman swung around, startled. Graham's back was to him, his head bent over the desk. "You don't have to get tough," he said mildly.



"You heard me," Graham said. "Go to hell."

They flashed out into the bright, clear void above the satellite Parma, and Freedman changed his course for the home port. Behind them, the solid, bulking group of asteroids barred them once more from the main satellite group. There was only that single, carefully cut tunnel through the wall. Freedman remained by the controls, a frown on his thin pleasant face.

What was wrong with Jerry, acting like that? Sometimes he thought Jerry was a little nuts.

OLD MAN FOLLEY leaned back in his chair behind the desk in the Operations Office. Peter Folley was his full name and he had mild, washed out blue eyes that regarded Freedman in a puzzled manner.

"But Blair—" he protested quietly, in answer to Freedman's outburst.

"I've made up my mind," Freedman said. "I've threatened to leave a dozen times. It isn't you. It isn't anyone. Or, for that matter, anything special. I'm fed up on the job and I want something exciting. The Warrior Patrol is my meat."

Folley found a cigar and lighted it. He seemed to relax a little. He was getting ready to argue the case.

Freedman knew he couldn't escape the argument. He had too much respect for Pete Folley to walk out on him.

"Remember, Pete," he said, "I've made up my mind this time. The old pep talk won't do any good. I'm fed up."

Folley was stubborn. He found a piece of paper and a pen-stick.

"Watch this, Blair," he said, and made a little  $x$  in the right side of the paper.

"Vestena," he said, pointing to the  $x$ . "The strongest satellite in the outer area. On the left side of the sheet he put another  $x$ . "Parma," he said. "The gold satellite—power of the system."

He blacked in the center with a heavy series of lines.

"Now then," he said slowly, "I'm trying to show you that this job is important. Get me straight. I know it's no cinch to go through that damned tunnel twice a day, week after week. To blast the Cutter through, pushing aside asteroids and slaving in the dark.

"But listen to me, Blair. You got it all wrong. You say yourself that there's a war heading up between Parma and Vestena. If war comes there'll be a lot of glory for the Warrior Patrol. You'll be big stuff. You'll be a great guy. *But did it ever occur to you how Vestena plans to attack Parma?*"

He paused dramatically, then plunged on with his story.

"Vestena fighters have to fly the long route, fifteen thousand miles around the asteroid belt. They can't do that. The supply line is too long. They think they're coming through the tunnel."

Freedman shook his head.

"Simple problem," he said. "We'll close the tunnel. They haven't the brains or equipment to re-open it again."

Folley shook his head.

"We can't do that, son. When Planet Control gave us the contract for the tunnel, it collected vast sums of money from the fifteen associated satellites. Now war is coming between *two* of those satellites. The others still hold a huge interest in the tunnel. Business has to go on as usual between those other satellites. It can't stop. The tunnel has to be kept open. It will be."

"How?" Freedman asked.

"By an independent fighting group. By Tunnel Control."

Freedman shook his head.

"Sorry, Pete. It's a good argument, but it just isn't good enough. I need lots of void to move in, Pete. I need the thunder of guns and the taste of flame. Can't get it out of my system. Maybe, when it's over . . . ?"

Pete Folley swore.

"Graham told me it was no good arguing with you," he said in a low voice. "Okay, Blair, desert us. Run away and join the damned army. But don't come sniveling back to me when it's over. We'll fight our battles without you. When we've finished, there'll be no place for a guy who walked out on us."

Freedman felt a cold stab go up his back. He had never thought it would be like this. Jerry Graham, and now Pete. Old Folley who had raised him since he was a kid. He straightened his shoulders.

"If that's the way it is," he said.

"That's just the way it is," Folley said,

and looked down at the desk top with brooding eyes.

Freedman turned and went out.

**B**LAIR FREEDMAN'S room was barren. His things were packed neatly into three trunks in the center of the floor. Freedman stood near the window looking down into the street. The car from the Warrior Patrol would be here shortly to pick him up.

He looked around the place for the last time. A queer feeling of homesickness swept over him. This room at the Setric Hotel had served him for the past ten years. Now he was leaving it to take over quarters in the splendid barracks of the Warrior Patrol of the Parma Air Force.

A knock sounded on the door. Thinking the boy had come up for his bags, he called:

"Come in."

Freedman didn't look up as the door opened. He heard footsteps near the door, then a quiet, feminine voice said:

"Do you usually ignore your visitors?"

Freedman straightened, his face red, to stare with surprise at the slim, honey-haired girl inside the door. She wore the uniform of the Space Merchants of Vestena. Her neat figure seemed molded into the scanty leather breeches and gold-cloth vest. A small light-gun hung loosely from the belt around her waist. Was it his imagination, or did the fingers of her right hand poise lightly over the gun?

"Hello," he said slowly. "I don't think I know you. I had expected . . ."

She nodded.

"The porter," she said. "Yes, I had to bribe him to let me come up."

Blair Freedman felt new warmth in his face. Anger, rising slowly, made his fingers clench.

"Why was it so necessary to see me?"

He didn't like it. The Space Merchants were neutral, but the satellite Vestena was stalling waiting to declare war. Could she be a spy?

The girl walked across the room and looked down on the busy square below. Her back was turned to him. She had a way of coolly going about her business as though he didn't exist, and speaking to him only when she was ready to do so. He watched the slim, well-built figure, the

maze of fluffy gold that hung about the back of her neck.

"You're Blair Freedman," she said, without turning around.

"You knew that before you came up here."

Silence.

"You're going to join the Warrior Patrol?"

"If that's any of your business, yes." He was blazing mad. Mad because she had the nerve to walk calmly into his room and question him.

"See here," he snapped, "I've got work to do. You've said your piece. Now get out of here before I call the management."

She whirled around, facing him, solemn blue eyes staring into his.

"You asked for it," she said. "You're joining the Warrior Patrol to make yourself a big-shot. You've got to have glory and blood. I'll tell you something. You bored the tunnel through the asteroid belt. You handled the 'Cutter.' You've done the job three times now and it's a job that one man in a thousand has the courage to tackle. Now you're walking out on the Tunnel Patrol."

She hesitated, panting, catching her breath.

"Well, *Mr. Big*, you're walking right out into the open where they can take a pot shot at you, and don't think they won't do it."

He took two strides toward her and grasped her wrist. He must have held it tightly for tears started from her eyes.

"Go ahead—hurt me. You can. You're very strong."

"Who's taking pot shots at me?"

She jerked away from him violently.

"It's none of your darn business. You deserve to be shot. You're a tin horn sport, running away from a real job to get your wings covered with star dust."

She backed away from him, holding her wrist, her eyes blazing.

She reached the door and opened it quickly.

Freedman, completely bewildered by what had happened, started after her. The light-gun shot into her hand and its barrel pointed at his stomach.

"I came here to help you," she said coldly, "but I think I could shoot now, you bull-headed, star-chasing hero."



*The Z-1000 moved stolidly ahead, its blades roaring.*

He stopped short. The girl was beautiful, and so angry that her eyes seemed to shoot flame.

"Who are you? Why did . . .?"

"I came because I thought I loved you," she clipped the words off with an utterly matter of fact voice. "Now I find that you're so much in love with yourself that there isn't room for anyone else."

She was gone, and the room was silent. A Parma housefly zoomed across the room and lit on the door knob. Freedman jerked the door open and the fly buzzed away. The hall was empty. He listened. Not a sound.

He went back in, shaking his head slowly.

"Well I'll—be . . ."

A girl who came from nowhere. A girl he had never seen before, and she had come to say that she loved him, and in the same breath, threatened to shoot him through the stomach.

Freedman sat down on the edge of the bed. He felt a little shaky . . .

**L**IUTENANT BREECHER made a wide, sweeping gesture with his free hand. "The Warrior Patrol of Parma." Blair Freedman sat in the cramped, efficient little fighter rocket, following Breecher's hand as the Warrior Patrol swept in toward the entrance to the Asteroid Tunnel.

"I'm proud to be in the force," Freed-

man said. "I've watched you men for years. Always had the feeling that I had to desert those pluggy patrol ships and get into the fighters. It's a great feeling. A clean feeling, as though I've dropped the slow, dull life and kicked up my heels for a real run in the void."

Breecher's head came around slowly, where he could study Freedman's face more easily.

"Those thousand ships out there are all that lie between Parma and destruction," he said slowly. "Yet, if it weren't for the tunnel, you know, they would have to travel too damned far to get at us. They can fight their war two ways. Plan a series of battles with the Warrior Patrol, or blow up the tunnel and seal Parma behind that ungodly range of Asteroids. Either way, Parma would choke in a few months. The tunnel is important."

Freedman nodded. It troubled him, all this reference to the tunnel. First Folley, then the girl, and now, even Lieutenant Breecher of the Warrior Patrol.

"Strictly routine stuff, though," he said, almost in self-defense. "A hundred men, a few patrol ships, and an occasional trip with the Cutter to clear out debris. That's the tunnel patrol, year after year."

The Lieutenant let well enough alone. The Warrior Patrol had swept past now. The dull, war-painted heads on the rockets

were business-like and ready. The Lieutenant nosed his own ship into the tail of the formation and opened his jets. They swept back toward Parma.

"There, I've shown you the boys and their ships," he said. "Tomorrow you'll fly with them."

The ugly static of the relay-screen broke in.

*"Calling Warrior Patrol—Calling Warrior Patrol."*

"That's Leader Van Nordast," Lieutenant Breecher said in a low voice. "Something's up."

Van Nordast's face was on the screen. He looked powerful, compact, businesslike.

"The Warrior Patrol will not come to base tonight. It will protect the outer entrance to the asteroid tunnel.

"A hundred extra ships are being sent at once. They will join the Patrol near the Tunnel Patrol ship, and base there until further orders come from this office.

"Post guards and *watch that tunnel*. By tomorrow, news will be up to date and I will give you further instructions."

The image on the screen sighed.

"You may as well know tonight. Vestena didn't wait for us to make plans. It tried to destroy the tunnel today. Sabotage, with a few suicide ships.

"A few men were killed but the attempt failed. That is all. Proceed to base."

The screen was empty again, and Blair Freedman was cussing and wondering if maybe Jerry Graham had been right.

He could fight now. He had the best equipment in the planetary system.

*A few men were killed . . .*

He remembered Van Nordast's words. Grim words that probably applied to the boys he had known since childhood. Maybe Jerry was one of them. Jerry Graham with his gray-black hair, wrinkled kindly face and gentle eyes peering from behind his specs.

The Lieutenant hadn't spoken since the message flashed off. Now he said:

"Well, you're going to get your baptism of fire sooner than I expected."

"Yes," Freedman said. "Yes, that's right."

He was wondering if it made any difference. If Jerry was dead, he'd have to kill a couple thousand soldiers to revenge that one kindly man.

THE GUARD SHIP on the outer end of the Asteroid Tunnel was anchored in space a short distance from the tunnel itself. It had to carry its own supplies, heavy armament and ammunition. Normally, it was capable of holding off a dozen space fighters, sending them reeling back with the heavy punches from its cannon.

The Warrior Patrol came in on a sweeping arc, and slowed to circle about and finally hide the rugged, stocky mother-ship that guarded the tunnel. Orders were given. Ships and pilots were warned not to fly too close to the heaving mass of asteroids. They looked solid. Actually, they were in motion every second, tons of ragged, grinding metal and stone, heaving a few inches this way or that, destroying anything that touched their surface.

It was through this terrifying belt of death that Blair Freedman had first dared point the prow of the "Cutter" and had, by sheer guts, torn a tunnel through the asteroids that served to demolish the thousands of miles of impossible flying by the outside route to Parma.

In peace, the asteroid belt had been pierced by the needle-like tunnel and through it commerce poured to the other worlds. It was the Panama Canal of space. In peace time, a simple job of patrolling. In war, it might become a hell-spot of intrigue and battle.

The Warrior Patrol had come to protect it, keep it open, and to prevent the fighting ships of Vestena from using it to conquer Parma.

A vast set for a chess game. The pieces were placed, alert and waiting, about the tunnel head. When would the opposing player make his first move?

Lieutenant Blair Freedman left his ship, moved carefully up the deck of the mother-ship and entered the air lock. In five minutes he was talking to fat, easy going Captain Stew in the mother-ship. Captain Stew wasn't the pudgy old gentleman's real name, but he had been called by it for so many years that any other he may have had was long forgotten. The Captain, with his home-made, blue denim uniform and enormous black pipe, led Freedman into his cabin and offered him the place of honor on his bunk.

"Sit, Blair," he said. "Suppose you heard the news?"

Freedman nodded. He hated to ask what had happened. Captain Stew was a tough old warrior. He could hold off half an army with this big, well armed ship. He knew how to fight and how to live. He hated to part with men.

"What happened here?"

Stew puffed mightily on his pipe and laid it down. "Nothing much, if they hadn't shot two of my gunners."

A tiny sigh escaped Blair's lips. Then Jerry Graham was safe.

"Night work," Stew said briefly. "Two ships passed and signalled with our flags for permission to enter. I gave them the okay after checking their numbers and the flight charts. They didn't go into the tunnel. I saw them start heaving stuff out into space at the tunnel mouth.

"It was pretty dark, but I recognized the stuff they were tossing out," He paused, then said, "Space mines."

"They planned to blow the head of the tunnel?"

Stew nodded.

"I opened fire and blew them straight to hell."

"But your men?"

Stew grunted

"They had time to put one shot across my forward deck. Knocked out one gun. Killed a couple of good boys."

He stood up, emptied his pipe and put it back into his mouth with bowl upside down.

"Graham and his men came through on routine patrol just a few seconds after those damned ships blew up," he said. "If they had hit one of them space mines . . ."

Freedman stared ahead of him at the smoke darkened walls.

"That would have been tough," he said. "Well, the danger's over now."

He stood up.

"I think the Warrior Patrol is strong enough to protect the tunnel, don't you, Captain?"

Captain Stew looked thoughtful.

"Strong enough," he said, "if the rats will come out in force and fight. Take my word for it, though, they'll make more attempts like the one last night. This isn't the . . ."

Captain Stew was cut off suddenly by a mighty explosion that seemed to come from directly below. The mother-ship

took a quick lurch that sent them both to the floor. Stew, in spite of his size, was the first to regain his feet.

"What the . . ."

They stumbled out onto the deck. The darkness was sliced with orange and red flame. The entire fleet, it seemed to Freedman, had opened fire at a dark object disappearing toward Vestena.

He watched the object for fifteen seconds, then saw it dissolve in white hot flame.

The guns became quiet. The decks of the mother-ship stopped shaking. Captain Stew howled something at the top of his voice and a gunner came running up.

"Why in the name of the Seven Ton God of Hate didn't you call me?" Stew shouted.

The soldier, grim faced, sooted by the cannon smoke, did his own share of cursing.

"Didn't have time," he fumed. "One ship. It sneaked up to the tunnel mouth and didn't even show a light. It tossed out enough stuff to seal that tunnel for keeps. Captain Stew, there's a patrol ship due through from Parma in fifteen minutes. The tunnel's sealed tight."

**F**REEDMAN KNEW the ship. His ship was due, with Graham at the wheel. Freedman knew where the radio was on the mother-ship. He dashed down the deck.

The radio man was flashing signals to Parma, warning all flights to wait for approval to come ahead.

Freedman slammed himself down at the board.

He plugged in the tunnel speaker. The power board showed zero. The mighty voice that could speak to anyone in the tunnel was dead.

"The guns shook some wires loose," the control man said. "We'll try the electro-screen."

They worked swiftly, trying to contact Jerry Graham. Finally his voice came on to the screen. He had a cheerful grin on his face.

"Hey," he said, "what's wrong at tunnel head? I'm getting a whistle on the screen but I can't tune you in. Something wrong with your transmission."

"For Heaven's sake, Jerry," Freedman

shouted, "turn back, don't come through."

Graham looked puzzled.

"Seems like I hear a voice," Graham was saying. His eyes were bright and sparkling behind his specs. "You guys playing a joke on me? I can hear something that sounds like a voice, but I can't hear words. Just a jumble."

"Jerry," Freedman shouted. "The tunnel head is blown out."

The control man was working furiously with the set.

"Sure, we'll have a blow out," Graham said. The smile was broad on his lips. Five minutes to the tunnel head. Five minutes between that smile—and sudden death.

"What the hell," Freedman said. "We've got to get this set running."

"Hey," Jerry Graham was saying, "what is wrong with your sender? The screen is blurred. The static is awful. Clear it up, will you?"

"Can't," Freedman mumbled to himself. Perspiration stood out on his face. "Can't, Jerry. Can't."

The control man continued to work.

"Never had this happen before," he said.

"Guns were raising hell for a while. They blew out the tubes on both sets. Wire shorted somewhere. Can't find it."

Freedman looked at the clock.

"One minute," he said in a humble, frightened voice. "One minute of life for Jerry." He paused and then put his face close to the screen.

"Jerry," he shouted, "Jerry, for God's sake, go back. The tunnel . . ."

It wasn't any use. Before he stopped talking, Graham said:

"Wow, this is *too* much. You guys sound like a bunch of wailing bachelors. I'm signing off until you get that sender running again."

"Jerry . . ."

There was something wild and uncontrolled in Freedman's plea.

The screen clicked and was white. Dead white, like a sheet drawn over a corpse.

Freedman sat there, idly holding his watch, his face pale, eyes vacant. The control man kept on working, patiently, carefully. After a long time Freedman looked at his watch. He stood up. He walked unsteadily toward the door, to meet Captain Stew coming in.

"Guess everything is okay up there," Stew motioned back toward the deck. "Did you contact Graham?"

Freedman couldn't hear him. He pushed Stew aside and went out, staring across the void at the line upon line of fighters, grouped like soldiers at attention.

Behind him, Captain Stew spoke to the control man.

"What the hell's burning him up?"

The control man's head came up slowly from the set.

"He ain't feeling so good," he said. "Seems like he deserted a pal a while back, and now his pal's dead. I think he's kinda sorry he wasn't on the job when it happened."

Stew nodded slowly.

"That's tough," he said. "I guess I know how he must feel."

**B**LAIR FREEDMAN stood rigidly before the desk, arms at his sides, eyes on Peter Folley. Folley didn't look up. He gripped Freedman's release papers in his hand. He wasn't reading them.

"So you came back?"

Freedman didn't answer.

"I suppose on account of Jerry, huh?" Folley said. "You were talking to Jerry just before he died, they said."

Freedman found his voice.

"I tried to warn him."

Folley nodded slightly.

"If you had been with him, you'd have known the tunnel head was blocked. You had that gift, the sense of feeling pressure changes. You would have saved Jerry."

Freedman didn't answer. He had left the Warrior Patrol and come back to his old job again. He had to carry on for Jerry Graham.

"Well," Folley said suddenly, "I know what you want, and I don't need you. You quit once. That's enough. Go back and get all the glory you can out of army life. We'll get along."

He stood up and turned his back to Freedman.

Freedman picked up the release papers and put them into his pocket slowly. His hands shook.

"Pete," he said, "I was a fool. It took Jerry's death to make me see it. I came back to say I was sorry. Jerry Graham was like a brother to me. I want the old job



back. I want to open the tunnel and keep it open."

Pete Folley faced him slowly. He looked very tired. His face was pale and dark pockets stood out under his eyes.

"I'm giving up," he said desperately. "I can't fight alone. Ten of my best men have been killed in a week. As fast as we open the tunnel, an enemy ship darts in and commits suicide to blow it closed again. I haven't got the men or the guts to keep on fighting. It's up to the Warrior Patrol to protect the tunnel. Your place is with them."

Freedman wanted to help Folley then. Wanted to prove his worth all over again.

"Pete, you and I started the tunnel. We always have kept it open. If we work together now, I think we can do it again. You, I and—Jerry."

There was a brief flash of hope in Folley's eyes. Then it faded and he looked glum.

"Okay," he said, "You know where the Cutter is. Take it out in the morning. You're on the payroll, as long as there is one."

**T**HE TUNNEL PATROL, in spite of its homely name and lack of dignity was a big organization. Its field and hangars housed a hundred speedy patrol ships, tons of special earth moving equipment, and last but not most powerful, the ship referred to as the Cutter.

Freedman came down the field to the huge building that housed the Cutter. He slipped quietly into the side door, still shivering from the cold morning fog that had settled on the port. He paused, old memories surging through him. Memories of the long days and nights he and Jerry had spent behind the instrument board of the huge craft.

The Cutter was officially labelled Z1000. Its vast bulk filled a space equal to a city block. Its bulky, blade covered nose wasn't graceful. In fact, the whole ship looked like a vast, bloated sausage with spiral blades attached to its bow, and a number of stove pipe lengths at the stern which shot out thunderous potions of fire and gas.

It was a special job, the Z1000. It was a working man's ship. A ship that you couldn't batter and destroy. The Z1000 could take it. It had taken unbelievable pun-

ishment already and it was ready for more.

Freedman mounted the ladder and went into the belly of the ship. It was like coming home again. He half expected to hear Jerry Graham shout to him from the navigation room above.

"Damned imagination," he said aloud. He said it bitterly.

His voice came back to him, a hollow thing echoing through the interior of the Cutter.

He climbed the series of steps and came out on the platform behind the blades. He entered the navigation room. Already the doors of the hangar were rolled back by the electric-finger he had touched as he came in.

No use waiting for anyone or anything. He was flying alone. Freedman adjusted the fuel indicators. Folley had told him last night that the lanes would be open and no ships were maneuvering this side of the tunnel. He drew back the rocket release levers, sat back and adjusted the delicate headphones that would tell him what the blades on the ship's nose were doing. Then, as though riding behind a plugging work horse, he started to doze.

This, he thought, hasn't the speed or the flash of the fighting ships. It's a tough job to do. But I'll do it.

The job wasn't a pleasant one. Freedman knew that near the far end of the tunnel, wedged into the debris of the wrecked tunnel, his old ship, the X26, was laying. In the control room, if there was still a control room, Jerry Graham's crushed corpse would be stretched across the instrument panel.

An endless hour passed.

The flight was no longer routine. He was nearing the end of the tunnel. The Cutter, Z1000 had taken the grinding, tearing trip easily, and her plates were hardly heated by the occasional edges she had to rip from the tunnel. He slowed the huge sausage-like ship and watched the instruments closely. Fifteen miles—then only ten.

He braked the ship and paused. Here, according to the instruments, the X26 would be wedged.

Grimly, Freedman donned the oxygen suit, turned on the powerful lamps that would light his way in the inky black tun-

nel, opened the forward hatch and went out. Ahead and all around him were the dense metals and rocks of the tunnel. The crushing, tearing sounds, always present in this weird place, seemed worse today. He climbed carefully out on the huge cutter blades, down the emergency ladder and jumped to the X26. It wasn't as badly wrecked as he had feared. That didn't mean that it would fly again, or that there was any hope of Graham being alive. He knew that the X26 had hit with a speed that would insure at least a broken neck for near-sighted Jerry.

No sense kidding yourself, Blair, he thought.

He worked his way into the broken hatch of the X26, found a heavy emergency bar and tore the door to the main cabin open. It was as he he thought. Jerry hadn't known what happened. The accident had come too fast. Jerry had been thrown to the floor. There were no marks on his body. His lips were parted in amazement, but no horror.

Freedman choked back a sob, picked Graham up tenderly and went back along the wrecked corridor. In the Z1000 he placed Graham on one of the emergency bunks, strapped him down and covered the body with a blanket. His teeth were gritted tightly together. His knuckles were white. He felt little emotion, or rather, tried to steel himself against feeling it.

Back in the control room, he sat down, pulled out the special valve release that ran the Cutter blades and waited for their steady, powerful rhythm to tell him that they were ready to cut.

This was a part of the business that had always thrilled him. Today it was just a job. A dirty, routine job. There wasn't any pleasure in it.

He thought of Jerry. Jerry who had laughed and gone to his death because a certain Blair Freedman had deserted him and tried to find glory.

The cutters were gyrating at a terrific speed now. The nose of the Z1000 was hot with the movement of the bearings. Freedman turned on the oilers. Long, thick jets of oil started to shoot out ahead of the ship, glancing off the blades, oiling the rocks.

Savagely, as though this was a personal battle, Freedman turned on the forward

power. The Z1000 hit the remains of the wrecked patrol ship, ripped through it and into the sullen, slow moving mass of metal and rock. It shuddered once, then settled down, matching its blades against the mass.

It moved stolidly ahead, and the roar of the blades drowned out everything else.

The wall wouldn't be thick. Freedman grimaced. He remembered the months he had spent ripping through the first time.

He'd like to go on tearing and gouging, fighting the only way he knew—fighting nature.

Those slim, tube like army ships weren't for him. His job was to slog along, ripping away at the barrier that at once protected and cut off his home satellite from the other satellite nations.

The Z1000 was a fighting ship that would never enter the war directly, and yet affected its course more vividly than any single unit of the fleet.

*Never enter the war directly?*

Freedman wondered. Listening to the inhuman power of the Cutter, he wondered. It might be feasible. He had never studied speeds and pressures. Just how much punishment could the big ship take?

Suddenly, with a lurch, the Z1000 tore itself from the wall and flew out into space.

Swiftly, as the cutters were already whirring upward toward a breaking speed, Freedman cut the power and idled in space. To his left, the fleet was drawn up in neat battle lines. Captain Stew's guard ship was floating about, and he knew that Stew himself would be watching him coming. They had been listening to his thunderous battle with the rocks for some minutes.

For a second Freedman felt elation because he had once more battled with nature and won. Then he remembered Jerry Graham, stretched lifelessly on the bunk in the room below.

The fight was just starting.

THE GIRL stood on the apron near the hangar. Though it was dark, he knew her at once. In the light of the moon, she seemed more like a ghost than a woman. Her hair was like a soft gold crown. Her dress, cut close to her body, was white and of rare Vestena silk.

Freedman wanted to avoid her, and yet

there was that mystery that clung to her and forced him to walk toward her.

"You've come back from the tunnel," she said.

Her voice was low.

He nodded. He was tired. He had just called the authorities and asked them to remove Graham's body from the Z1000. The tunnel was open again and the fleet guarded it. He needed rest.

"The tunnel is open. You told me I was a tin-horn sport. I don't know who you are, but you were right. I'm working in the tunnel again. That's what you wanted."

Though he had seen her only once before, he was anxious to please her. She was like an angel, appearing only when he needed her, and slipping away into the night again.

"You're still feeling very much like a hero, aren't you?" she challenged. "You've just opened the tunnel. You're tired and you want to be alone. You've done something big and wonderful."

He didn't try to explain to her. He didn't tell her of Jerry's crushed body in the ship and how he, himself, felt crushed and weary.

"No . . . I . . ."

"Don't talk to me," she said scornfully. Fire danced in her eyes. The fresh wind sent her hair, the flimsy gown, flying in the wind. "I told you I loved you once."

"I don't even know you," he protested. "Why have you chosen me?"

Her voice was steady now. Steady and like a whip lash.

"Because I knew you from the time you entered the patrol as a boy," she said. "I worshipped you from afar, and I know of everything you did. I talked to my father every day, sometimes more often than that. He thought the planet system would have fallen apart if you hadn't been here to steady it."

*Her father?*

"You seem determined to punish me," he said unsteadily. He could hear the ambulance car rocketing across the field now. They were coming for Jerry.

"I'll go on punishing you," she said. "If it hadn't been for you, Dad wouldn't be dead now, laying over there in that ship."

*Dad? Jerry Graham?*

"You're not . . .?"

Her nod was barely discernible.

"Jerry Graham lived on Vestena for many years," she said. "When mother died, he put me into a community school. He came here. He never told anyone . . ." Her voice broke.

"Through my father, I worshipped you. It's all dead now. If I can find a way to hurt you, I'll do it."

She whirled and was gone, a slim, wind-swept figure in the vast darkness of the field.

He started to run after her. Then he saw the tiny, sport-model rocket plane parked at the edge of the apron. She was in it and the rockets were exploding before he could reach her.

She waved her arm at him as the ship leaped forward. She shouted something that was drowned in the roar of rocket exhaust. Then she was gone.

PETER FOLLEY was talking. "The jig's up, Blair. The Vestena merchants have signed an oath to refuse further trade with Parma. You know what that means?"

Blair Freedman nodded. It didn't make any difference to him now. Not, at least, until he found Sheila Graham and made her understand how he really felt about Jerry's death.

"I suppose we'll close the tunnel?"

Folley shook his head and frowned.

"No, that's the bad part of it. We've got to hold the tunnel open."

He leaned forward, tapping his pencil.

"United Satellites, comprising fifteen powers, accepted a contract to open the tunnel, on the promise that we would *keep* it open. Now there's a war between Vestena and Parma. The Merchants of Vestena won't buy from us, and the tunnel was used mostly by their ships. Yet, even if the other powers no longer use the tunnel, we promised to keep it open in the event they do. They won't release us from that contract. Now we've got to keep open our most vulnerable approach. We've got to protect it from the people who will leave no stone unturned in their effort to destroy us by attacking through the tunnel. It's a nasty mess."

It was nasty. Freedman realized it. But this was an army job. A job for the Warrior Patrol.

He stood up.

"I'll keep my end going," he said. "I'm doing three patrols every day. When you need the Z1000, you know where to find me."

He was half way to the door when Folley stopped him.

"What's eating you, Blair?" Folley asked abruptly.

Freedman whirled around.

"Jerry's death for one thing," he said.

Folley shook his head.

"I know," he said. "There's something else. I'd almost swear you were in love, with that miserable, whipped pup look you've been carrying on your map."

Blair didn't answer. Damned nonsense, he thought. He wanted to see Sheila Graham. But not because he was in love with her. He wanted to explain about Jerry, and tell her that he felt as miserable about it as she did.

She, supposedly, was on Vestena, the enemy satellite.

CAPTAIN STEW strode up and down the cabin, his huge paunch moving ahead of him like an anchored balloon. Stew was angry. Angry clean through. He showed it with his frown, the set of his lips. He said:

"The damned army isn't getting anywhere. Look here, Freedman, what's gonna happen when the Vestena fleet attacks and enters the tunnel?"

Blair Freedman had been with Stew for several hours. He was almost ready for the return patrol trip now. He stood up wearily.

"That's the worry of the Warrior Patrol," he said. "My orders are to keep the tunnel open."

Captain Stew stopped pacing the floor.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, you're in the clear. Look at it like I do. Eight times now, Vestena suicide ships have shot in here and dropped explosives into the tunnel mouth. Eight times you've plowed them out again. Not once has the Vestena army attacked.

"When they do, they're going straight through to the other end of the tunnel. There isn't room *inside* the tunnel to fight. There isn't any Parma fleet at the other end.

"Damned if we can stop them here.

They'll be in the tunnel before we have time to strike."

Freedman shrugged.

"Blow up the tunnel."

"Sure," Stew bellowed, "and have every satellite in the system on our neck. This ain't war boy. It's politics, and Parma has its political neck stuck out right over the block."

FREEDMAN READ the note a dozen times. He propped it up near the mirror as he shaved, trying to figure out why Sheila would trouble herself again with him. *Blair Freedman, it said, meet me at the Z1000 hangar tonight at moonrise.* He scowled at the mirror as he shaved. The girl had admitted that she lived with the Space Merchants on Vestena. Admitted that she was actually from an enemy country. It took nerve, he thought, for her to come here alone.

He was undecided about the proposed meeting at the hangar. Was it some sort of a trap? She had threatened him. Freedman smiled. Threatened by a girl. He washed his face, donned a fresh tunic and laced it. He found his space pistol, always worn in these unstable days, and strapped it on.

Moonrise, he thought, and made a mental calculation. Half hour to ten. Here I come, Miss Graham, and no tricks please.

He locked the door behind him and went down to the rocket car in the hotel court.

The Z1000 bulked huge and secure in the semi-darkness of the hangar. The low moon was coming up slowly, and the high moon already shot its pale rays from the Larr Mountains in the opposite direction. This was one of those rare, beautiful nights when Parma seemed to bask proudly in the light of its moons. A night for peace, Freedman thought, and Vestena ships probably already on the prowl.

He walked up and down in front of the Z1000. A tiny ship shot over the far edge of the field and landed daintily near the hangar apron. It rolled up until the shadow of the hangar almost hid it. Sheila Graham jumped out and came toward him. She was at his side before he saw the frightened look on her face.

She took his hand.

"You're a man of honor," she said in a clipped, matter-of-fact voice. "I've had

to change my mind about you. You're doing a good job."

She let go of his hand and stared earnestly into his eyes.

"You know nothing of me. Perhaps I'm not Sheila Graham. I come from enemy territory. Would you trust me on a very important mission?"

He stared at her. It didn't make sense. He saw the fright in her eyes. He knew that she had something of great importance on her mind. Something that she must do and yet feared to try without his help.

"I don't understand," he said. He was careful not to show his true feelings toward this childlike, delicate girl from Vestena. She wasn't born to fight, yet she seemed to be a fighter. "First you hate me, then you ask for help. What changed your mind?"

Her face was tinged with sudden color.

"I don't hate you," she said, and turned away, staring toward the moon that had just touched the top of the Larr Range. "I think you made a mistake. That mistake cost my father's life. Since then, you've done a loyal job. I can't tell you what we're going to do, but I know that with your help we can do it."

He waited, saying nothing.

"The ships of Vestena attack tonight," she said in a shaking voice. "We—you and I are going to stop them."

"Attack the whole army? Why didn't you notify the Warrior Fleet at the tunnel head? They could have been ready."

He wheeled away from her, but she caught up and put her hand on his arm.

"They can do nothing," she said. "The Vestena fleet sent a decoy army. The Warrior Fleet of Parma is thousands of miles out in space, pursuing a dummy army—an army of empty, robot-controlled ships that left Vestena hours ago."

"Now the true fleet is somewhere near the tunnel head, poised for a quick dash through."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Her eyes were steady on his.

"You've never doubted a word I've spoken."

Odd, he thought, but I never have. Why? Then he knew why. He was looking into Jerry Graham's eyes. The eyes of a man he had trusted above everyone else. This

was his daughter. There could be no doubt.

"I've got to warn the command at the city," he said.

She shook her head.

"There is no time. They can do nothing. The important thing is to stop the Vestena fleet from getting through the tunnel."

She started to run toward the Z1000. Over her shoulder she called to him.

"I have a plan. You must help. I can't operate the Cutter."

THEY were in the tunnel, and Freedman was confident once more. At the controls of the Z1000, he felt at ease. At his side, Sheila Graham was asking hurried questions.

"What speed can the blades carry?"

He told her.

"And the hull. How thick is it?"

He chuckled without humor.

"If you hit it with a city block at a thousand miles an hour, it might break."

She was figuring with a pen-stick on the smooth surface of the control board.

"How far are we into the tunnel?"

He consulted the mileage chart.

"Half way. It's . . ."

"Good," she said. "Turn on the blades. Use all the power you have."

There was an undercurrent of fear in her voice. He was sure that she struggled with herself at this moment to keep from breaking down. When she spoke again, the howl of the rotating blades drowned all other sound. Without stone or metal to work on, the blades were screaming at top speed, cooled only by the oil. The Z1000 was a strange, rumbling giant, stumbling ahead in the darkness.

"Blair," Sheila Graham said quietly, "Are you afraid to die?"

He felt cold beads of perspiration stand out on his forehead. The cabin was growing very hot. Deep down he had known all along but now, as he faced it consciously, he had to fight for control. His hands were clammy on the wheel.

"I told you I loved you very much once," she said. He didn't dare turn and look at her. This wasn't any time to go soft. "I haven't changed my mind. This was a very strange love affair, wasn't it?"

She didn't wait for his answer, but stumbled on, her voice eager.

"I haven't very much time to talk. Blair, I fell in love with you when I saw your picture. When Vestena became hostile, I was declared an orphan. I couldn't see Dad and he couldn't reclaim me. A rich man adopted me. He was a high member of the Space Merchants organization."

She sighed.

"I used to read about the work you and Dad did. That's why I was so badly hurt and angry when you left him to his death."

"I could get away from Vestena when I wished. My foster-father owned three ships. I learned the plan of the Vestena fleet from him. I waited until I knew how and when they would strike. Then I came back to you. I knew you'd be the only one to help."

He was silent. Then:

"It seems like old times," he said, slowly. "Seems as though Jerry and I are together again."

Her fingers touched his neck. She kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were soft and very warm. "Dad is here, I think. I'm a pretty important part of Jerry. We loved each other very much."

He was busy now. Busy keeping the Z1000 in one piece. If he kept up the dizzy power rate long, and the blades didn't meet an obstruction, they'd fly off and destroy the ship.

"How long do we have?"

She sighed.

"The fleet will be in the tunnel in two minutes. We should meet them in three."

"We'll stop them," he said in a harsh whisper.

**O**IL WAS sloshing and flying over the Cutter's blades. He listened to the unholy roar of the motor, then pushed the power lever down as far as it would go. The Z1000 leaped ahead a little faster. The blades sang a song of destruction.

In the cabin the heat became stifling. No longer able to see through the steamed windows, he turned out the lights. In the darkness, the red hot plates over the motor shaft made the place glow like a tiny hell. The extra power from the batteries hummed madly.

"Sheila," he turned toward her. In the glow of the hot plates, he could see her face, as pale as glistening shell. Her eyes

were moist and her face was close to his.

Then he could say no more, because her lips were pressed tightly to his.

"Blair, is there a chance . . . any chance at all?"

"The Z1000 was designed to cut rock and metal," he said. "I don't think the engineers ever planned to stop an army with it."

Two minutes. Then fifty seconds. Would the Vestena army be on time?

The blades were good for another five minutes at most. After that . . .

"Blair."

It was Sheila, her lips parted by a startled cry. Instinctively he grasped her and held her tightly against him in the heavily padded chair.

Ahead of them, bright fingers of light probed the darkness; lights that expanded rapidly, blindingly. The blades found something. There was a sound of ripping and tearing as metal shrieked against metal in deafening protest. The Z1000 stopped.

Still the hurtling lights of the Vestena fighters came on. One after the other, like blind fireflies, they flashed into the tunnel to be ground to bits by the screaming blades of the Cutter. Then the Z1000 lurched sickeningly. The enemy ships, ripping through the now broken and slowing blades, pounded at full speed into its hull. Blair Freedman, staggering and half-unconscious from the shock, sought for the controls. He was too late. The Z1000 had stopped running. He reached blindly for Sheila . . .

Outside, the tunnel was a hell of noise. Showering sparks cast an eerie red glow that was occasionally punctuated by the blinding white flash of an explosion. Ship after ship pelted into the buckling plates of the Cutter until the cavernous maw of the tunnel became a molten mass of smashed, twisted scrap.

Then, gradually, the noise died down as the last Vestena ship hurled itself into oblivion. The shriek of mangled metal was stilled. The fires flickered into darkness.

And in the control cabin of the huge Z1000, Blair Freedman and Sheila Graham, battered almost beyond recognition, lay in each other's arms—united in the final sacrifice of death.



# SIX TUESDAYS

*By* **ROSS ROCKLYNNE**

Not six Tuesdays in as many weeks, but the *same* Tuesday, repeating itself over and over! Ivan wondered what he'd gotten the universe into—with this crazy time-machine of his!



*We staggered back and slammed against the bulkheads.*

I, YOUNG PROFESSOR Ivan Friedman of Barton University, had no particular feeling about Tuesday. I did not love it. I did not hate it. I was totally indif-

ferent to it. It had no virtues that Thursday, or Wednesday, or Sunday, or any other day of the week didn't have.

Therefore, why should there have been

five Tuesdays that week? Why? Why, I asked myself, as I awoke and fumbled for the phone which had for the fifth consecutive time awakened me at exactly the same minute with the same dissonant jangle?

It was my friend Sam Yarbrough. For the fifth time in a row, in exactly the same words and tone, he casually asked me what was new.

"Nothing's new," I wanted to scream in his ear. "Sam, you big, blond, grinning, lazy oaf, nothing's new! That's the trouble! This is the fifth Tuesday. The phonograph is stuck on Tuesday, and it's playing us over and over and over and over again!"

But I didn't say that. I couldn't. I yawned instead. I playfully bawled hell out of him for waking me up at 8:00 in the morning. I accused him of being up with the telescope all night, and he admitted it.

"Got results this time though." His voice was lazily casual, but I couldn't fail to detect the undercurrent of excitement. "Guess what, Ivan, boy? I've discovered evidence of life on Pluto."

"You what?"

"And," he added happily, "I want to borrow your time-machine. I'll be over for breakfast and tell you what's cookin'."

*As if I don't know what's cookin', I thought, aghast. I know every word you're going to say, Sam. Every word, every expression. I know everything I'm going to say. And I can't change it!*

I hopped out of bed, tripping for the fifth time on my loose pajamas and cussing, and knowing all the while I was living Tuesday over again and somehow it must be the time-machine that had done it. But it couldn't be the time-machine. It couldn't. I had invented the time-machine in my spare moments, but it froze my blood even to think of traveling into the future and I hadn't used it. I'd left time-travel to big Sam Yarbrough. Last week, Sam had gone one hour into the future and then come right back. And the first four of these repeating Tuesdays he had used the time-machine, too, probably moving tens of thousands of years into the future. But certainly that couldn't affect me. Certainly it couldn't be the time-machine that had created five identical Tuesdays.

Identical, I thought? No. No! The first Tuesday, Sam had told me he'd discovered

evidences of life on Pluto. The second Tuesday, it had been Neptune. The third, Pluto. The fourth, Neptune. And today, the fifth Tuesday, Pluto again! The Tuesdays alternated between Pluto and Neptune. Why? Why? Crazily, I asked myself the same questions five times in a row, and I came up with not even one-fifth of an answer!

**S**AM CAME while I was starting on bacon and eggs. He was a lazy, wryly smiling big man with yellow hair spilling over his head. He was an advertising man during the day and an amateur astronomer at night whenever I could get him permission to use the University's 100-inch reflector. He stuttered when he was excited, but he seldom let himself get excited, and therefore picked his words slowly.

The story finally came out. It was an amazing story. It was front-page stuff. But Sam said, "Isn't much to it, Ivan. Early this morning I saw signals shooting across Pluto. Flashes of light, like code. Sounds like life there, eh? And that's the reason I want to borrow the time-machine."

*As if I didn't know, I thought starkly. Sam, this is the fifth Tuesday. Do you know it's the fifth Tuesday? Are you caught in the same trap and can't tell me about it? Is all the rest of the world caught in a circular Tuesday, and are they unable to do anything about it?*

But I couldn't say that out loud. I had to say what I'd said five times before. "It's wonderful, Sam! But what has the time-machine to do with it?"

"Well, it's because we don't have space-ships, Ivan. You know what a one-rut mind I've got. What to do is find out who—or what—made those signals. Best method is to go into the future where they've got interplanetary travel, steal a space-ship, go out to Pluto and then send space-ship and all back to the exact time I saw those flashes. Making allowances for the speed of light, naturally."

His blue eyes began to kindle with a growing excitement when I gave him the go-ahead. But he didn't let it get hold of him. He finished his meal by taking his time. He was a slow thinker and slow talker. Slow—but once he got his mind set, and once his big, muscular body got into motion, he kept on going. He intended to smash right into the future, beg, borrow

or steal a space-ship, and find out by hook or crook what was making on Pluto. So we went down to my basement laboratory, and walked into the metal-and-plastic six-foot cubic box which was the time-machine.

Horribly, I tried to break the circle, to make one move or utter one word which would act like a wedge which would pry open my prison. Unless. I was in the grip of a circular Tuesday. I was going round and round, unmusically. It would never, never stop. My thoughts and my physical actions were discords. My mind couldn't dictate to my body. I said things and did things I didn't want to.

Sam looked around the interior of the time-machine. He rubbed his hands in a slow gesture. "Swell," he said softly. "Got the new telechron coils in."

I added, "And a triple bank of storage cells. Good for several million miles into the future."

Sam walked around in the small cabin, touching the shiny machinery. I thought, *he's going to ask me to go with him.* He did. *And I am going to refuse.* I did—but more than anything else I wanted to tell him I would go. No matter that I was deathly scared of the time-machine, although I had invented it. No matter that the very thought of trusting myself to the contraption gave me the shudders. I wanted to go, just to break the circle—and I couldn't tell him I wanted to go.

Sam smiled mischievously. "You don't have to be afraid of this baby, Ivan. But if that's the way you want it—" He stuck out his hand and I shook it. He smiled lopsidedly. "I'll probably be back a few seconds after I start—as far as you're concerned, Ivan. But in case I'm not—" He shrugged. "So long till then, anyway."

"So long," I said hurriedly, and turned to the door of the time-machine. Inwardly I was thinking, *Sam, don't go. This is my fifth Tuesday this week, and there'll be a trillion more!*

How could I break it? How? Prodded on by the horror of my predicament, not even knowing whether Sam and the rest of humanity shared the predicament, my mind got into motion like a sprinter, taking the hurdles with an amazing, abnormal swiftness. Well, my mind at least was a free agent. How could I free my body?



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And suddenly I had it.

I was in the time-machine. Sam was already sitting down at the controls, clicking in the master-switch and several graduation tabs. The psycho-board was ready—

One moment I was standing there, about to shove the door open. The next moment the cosmo burst apart. I was lifted, stretched all out of shape, and then I disintegrated.

I heard a voice. "Ivan!" Sam was bemusedly slopping a wet cloth in my face. I spluttered. Sam said chidingly, "Crazy! I thought you didn't want to go. Now you *have* to go. We're on the way."

I LAY on the floor, gasping. I said, "I didn't want to. But I had to. I sent the mental command that started the machine ahead."

"I suspected that," said Sam.

"It was the only thing I could do," I babbled. Just to hear myself talk, to realize to the full that I wasn't caught in the Tuesday circle any more, I started to tell him the story. I started way back, telling him things he already knew. How the time-machine had grown out of my discoveries in the field of telesthesia in my parapsychological laboratory at Barton.

"I know all that," he said gently. "Telesthesia is the mental force which, as scientifically proved by Dr. Rhine of Duke University, gives some people the clairvoyant power to look into the future—or, better, to use extra-sensory perception. I know all that. The telechron coils amplify the telesthesiac force of the human mind in such a manner that the ship is pushed forward into time by mental command."

"But you don't know—" I said, starting to shake and shiver.

"Ivan," he said, "shut up. Hysteria is supposedly a feminine disease . . . That's better. Now go ahead and tell me what this is all about. Tell me the part I *don't* know."

He sat back on his haunches, playing absently with the sloppy rag while I came to a sitting position and told the story—all of it.

Sam said, "No kiddin'."

"It's true. First you saw flashes of light on Pluto, then Neptune, then Pluto, then Neptune, and today Pluto."

Sam said again, shaking a little and paling, "No kiddin', Ivan."

He got up, walked around the little cabin

in a daze, looked at the dial that was spinning off the years, pressed his nose to the ports, beyond which a grey obscurity showed, then came back.

"You must be joking, Ivan," he said. "You must be kiddin' the life out of me. It's a hell of a bad joke." He waited, but I clamped my lips grimly. He spoke again, and this time it had really hit him. He stuttered, "I n-never saw any fl-flashes on Neptune, Ivan. I don't remember s-seeing any fl-flashes on Neptune. I only rem-m-m-member one Tuesday! Gee, Ivan, you don't suppose we're—" He drew a deep breath and got mad. "*I know* they didn't come from Neptune! Oh, I was observing Neptune, too. But that's because Neptune and Pluto happen to be on a line with Earth at this time of year. And when I saw the flashes on Pluto I took a look at Neptune to make sure it wasn't an optical illusion. That's all."

"That's enough," I said hollowly. "Every other Tuesday you saw the flashes coming from Neptune and not Pluto. You simply don't remember the other four Tuesdays. I did remember them . . . Think of it, Sam. The universe has stopped on Tuesday. It won't move into Wednesday. Everybody on Earth has lived through five Tuesdays. Tomorrow they'll probably start off another Tuesday. And the day after that—"

Sam saw the way I was getting and so he offered me a cigarette. We smoked, and Sam stood there calming himself down. His face grew more and more thoughtful. He turned, looked at the dials again. He came back. He shoved me into one of the bolted-down chairs.

He said grimly, "We'll polish the various questions off one at a time, at our leisure. For instance, the reason you remember the Tuesdays and I don't is because you've got a telesthesiac mind. You were one of Dr. Rhine's prize pupils before you came to Barton to open a parapsychological lab. It's been proved your mind can look into the past and future to some degree. To your subconscious mind, past, present and future are all one. Your subconscious was simply powerful enough to let you remember the other four Tuesdays. And mine wasn't."

"I guess so," I said weakly.

"Well, then, buck up. You look sloppy scared. I guess we'll have to realize time-travel is rotten with paradoxes."

"You didn't look like Superman yourself for awhile," I muttered. "You were scared yourself . . . Anyway, it isn't the time-traveling that scares me now. It's the thought of the universe stuck on one Tuesday."

He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me over to the time dial. "Don't be silly," he said. "We're five thousand years into the future. It isn't the universe that's stuck on Tuesday, because we're in the future. It's us we have to worry about, really. We might not be able to get back to our own time—or if we do go back, we'll have to land in Tuesday, the fifth Tuesday. And we might wake up in the morning we think is Wednesday, and you'll reach for the telephone when it rings and—"

"Auk," I said, and turned away. Sam hovered over me concernedly, afraid I was going to be sick, and I finally gasped, "No more of that for awhile, Sam."

"Okay," said Sam. But he stubbornly added, "We both have to realize what our problem is. Each of the five Tuesdays calls the Tuesdays in front and back of it a liar. So for us the Tuesdays have to be played over and over again. You and I are really the only ones concerned. So we've got to fix it so two Tuesdays in a row tell the same story. Next day will be Wednesday."

"Oh, is *that* all!" I said in mock relief.

His lips stretched in a slow grin. "I guess it is easy to say. How to do it is another problem. Meantime, what do you say we swipe us a space-ship—if there are any space-ships to be had?"

A LITTLE over two hours later, ship-time, Sam and I were flattening our faces against the ports. We were looking out on the spaceship field over which the time-machine hovered.

"Some city over there," said Sam, judicially. "Big."

I shuddered. "And ugly people."

It was now the year 1,100,911 A. D. We had found interplanetary travel at last. It was somewhat discouraging to realize that man of the future would be short, neckless, flat-headed. But let evolution worry about that. We had our own problems, namely how to keep our personal Tuesdays from sticking their evening tails into their morning mouths, like the mythical hoop-snake rolling down hill.

The people of the future were now

looking up at a descending space-ship. They couldn't see us, of course, since we were extra-dimensional to them.

We were watching the space-ship greedily. It was a two hundred foot cylinder. It turned longitudinally on its axis as it came down. Amidships, disappearing and returning as the ship revolved, it was a great circular mirror-like spot. It threw out a ranging, tempestuous brilliance. Something to do with the propulsion, we guessed.

The ship landed. Men, women and children disembarked. Later came some officers with bright blue sequin-studded stars on their squat shoulders.

We were moving forward slowly in time, which meant Earth was revolving under us. Sam said, "Here goes, Ivan."

He hurriedly sat at the controls. Our time-ship changed its direction slightly, and melted straight through the walls of the space-ship. We moved on until the time-machine was enclosed by a glowingly-furnished cabin. My heart bounced once up and once down as Sam pushed the master switch closed. The time-machine dropped two inches to the spongy floor, and we were once more in the normal time-stream.

We opened the door of the machine, then of the cabin and stuck our heads out into the corridor like second-rate villains. Empty and gloomy, the corridor was. Up ahead was a brilliance. Might be the control room, we thought. We started up the corridor, but nervously.

We passed a branching corridor, and I almost froze with fright when we heard footsteps and saw three of the men of the future. They stood stock still. Sam didn't freeze. He dived at them, grabbed two of them with a fierce shout and banged their heads together. The other one burst into a shrill, piping cry and I threw my arms around him in a bear-hug, reached down, grabbed his ankles, turned him upside down and banged his head on the floor several times. Then I dropped him.

"Can't leave 'em on the floor," Sam panted. He turned the little men over, grabbed a couple strange-looking guns from their hips and tossed me one. "I'll beat it up to the control room—if it is the control room. You tie these babies up, stow 'em in a cabin, and look through the ship to see if there're anymore."

He went loping away, and I went in the

other direction. I found a plastic material that looked like it might serve the purpose of adhesive tape and tied the little men up. I went through the rest of the ship, found everything clear, and started back. I discovered the airlock of the ship was still open, played around with the controls until it went soundlessly shut. I felt wonderful. I was a young college professor who hadn't had an ounce of adventure in his life, and though I suspected I wouldn't get back from this one alive, it was still good. And I didn't much care if we didn't get back alive if we had to go back Tuesday.

I started back down the corridor, humming crazily, when the ship suddenly shook down its length. It leaped. I was thrown flat on my face. I felt a sensation of tremendous speed, and, groggily, a splinter of terror in my heart, I slogged up the companionway toward the control room.

But when I got there, Sam was grinning and he was standing behind a little man in a bucket-shaped chair, pressing one of the little tube-like weapons to the back of his flattened down head.

"Okay!" Sam said engagingly. "We're all set. This little monkey is the pilot. He tried to pull a fast one by starting the ship off sudden-like, thinking he'd be able to jump me. No go. Ivan, boy, we're on the way!"

**T**HE PILOT'S flat eyes glittered at us in humiliated hate. It was a half-hour later. The ship was moving fast, how fast we had no idea. But I'd looked through the rear ports and Earth and Moon were merely indistinguishable points of light in the heavens. We were probably moving thousands of miles a second. Yet we no longer had a sensation of motion, and Sam figured we had an inertialess drive.

Sam at first had tried to communicate where we wanted to go by means of sounds. He gave that up. Finally he drew a rough, non-scale chart of the Solar System—the Sun surrounded by nine circles. Sam pointed threateningly at the ninth circle. The pilot shrugged his abnormally broad, sequin-studded shoulders, and began to punch tabs. He closely eyed a complex instrument which seemed to consist of innumerable counteracting gyroscopes swinging in strange orbits in a cracking haze.

He watched a moving dial and when the

dial hovered at a certain point, threw a switch. The star-pattern, as seen through the view-plate, changed slightly and the pilot leaned back, folding his arms across his chest disdainfully.

Sam's blue eyes glowed. "Ship's essentially automatic Ivan. They probably don't even need a crew unless there're passengers aboard. The gyroscope thing looks like a mass-detector. Each planet has its own individual mass. He simply communicates the desired destination to the ship's machinery, and off it goes."

"He'll take the first chance he can to trick us, though," I muttered doubtfully. "If he hasn't already."

It took us two hours to reach the ninth planet. Fast, that ship was! Sam stood fork-legged, entirely lost in the startling beauty of the huge, streaked oblate-spheroid bowling up toward us. "Two hours to Pluto," he said dazedly. "Four billion miles from the Sun."

I was worried. "It doesn't look like Pluto, Sam."

He scoffed. "But who knows what Pluto looks like. It's too distant. It may be bigger than Earth or smaller. All we know in our time is that it takes about 250 years to go around the Sun and that its orbit is highly elliptical." He sucked in his breath. A wry smile twisted his face. "Are my eyes deceiving me, Ivan, boy? The darned planet's got a satellite!"

A satellite it had, a dark, cold lump of matter swinging on the gravitational arm of the planet. Sam began to stutter. "B-but Pluto hasn't g-got a satellite, dammit! Look at those red and orange stripes on the equator. The planet looks like Neptune. Not the ninth planet—the eighth! B-but it can't be!"

I said cynically, "Pluto, Neptune, Pluto, Neptune, Pluto. Remember? Five Tuesdays, all the same—only different."

"How could I forget?" he groaned. "But we have to check. Why would the pilot take us up to the eighth planet instead of the ninth? Suppose you go on back and send the space-ship back to Tuesday night—our time."

I did that. I went back to the cabin where the time-machine was parked, sat down in front of the psycho-board thinking at it. The balloon temporizers thrust out a growing sphere of telesthesia-force from the



telechron-coils until it enclosed the ship. I set the pointers, locked the controls, and went forward again.

The planet below us was spinning like mad. Its gorgeous colors had turned into a brown muddiness. It was turning backward in time at an enormous rate, toward the night of June 2. It took three hours, and then, as the time-machinery clicked off, the planet was suddenly normal again. We instructed the amazed pilot to drop toward the surface.

By our time, it was the night and the exact time that Sam had seen the flashes of light—the "signals."

The ship was bowling leisurely along just above the turgid cloud-banks of the planet. Sam and I were looking tensely down, striving to see the outline of a possible continent. But no, this was undoubtedly Neptune, with an atmosphere thousands of miles thick.

Sam and I turned our heads toward each other at the same moment. We both knew we were thinking of the same thing, had we come to the same rather insane conclusion.

Sam said with a wonderful calmness, considering his statement, "Well, Ivan, looks like this is the sixth Tuesday. I'm back on Earth now, looking through a telescope. I'm seeing flashes of light coming from Neptune."

"Is that so? Neptune this time, eh?"

"Un-huh. You see, we're crossing the Earthward side of this planet now. This ship is turning on its axis at the same time. There's a big brilliant mirror-like thing on one side of this ship. Probably an energy-exhaust or something. The 'mirror' is brilliant enough to be seen on Earth. As the ship turns, the light is cut off momentarily. Then it reappears again. Looks just like coded signals. S-so, I-Ivan, I'm d-down there on Earth loo-looking at the s-s-s-signals this ship we're in is making!"

I wobbled and had to sit down. He sat down, too, looking drained. "H-how do you I-like that?" he gasped. "I caused the flashes of light, but it was seeing the flashes that caused me to cause them, which caused me—Ouch! That's one person I don't want to meet—me, on the sixth Tuesday. I wouldn't like him."

We sat there and looked at each other,

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speechless. It was the sixth Tuesday. Sam was two places at the same time. He had caused the flashes. What now? Try to explain the inexplicable paradoxes time-travel leads you into? No, thanks.

I said shakily, "Well, Sam, the sixth Tuesday is calling the fifth Tuesday a liar. Now's your chance. Remember? It's up to us."

Sam got up and padded softly back and forth, one eye on the pilot. He stopped short, brushing his yellow hair back with worried fingers. Suddenly he whirled, jerked out a finger as if he were nailing an idea down.

"I think I've got it," he said huskily. "This is the sixth Tuesday. If we let things go on as they are, I—me down on Earth—will give you a ring and tell you I've seen signals on Neptune. Then there'll be a *seventh* Tuesday. See? Ivan, we've got to stop it—now! And it's simple. We'll fix it so I see signals come from both planets—on one Tuesday. Now we'll really go to Pluto!"

**T**HE ONLY TROUBLE with that decision was that we couldn't get the pilot to agree that the planet below wasn't Pluto!

Naturally, we'd thought he'd tricked us or made a mistake. But his flat, dollar-size eyes matched Sam's in stubbornness. Whenever Sam pointed at the ninth circle on the chart, the pilot as insistently pointed at the streaked bulk of the planet above whose poisonous atmosphere we were flying.

"Listen here, you futurian monkey," Sam said with restraint. "Are you trying to tell me I don't know my astronomy? Don't you think I know which is the eighth planet and which is the ninth? I'd wring your neck if you had a neck."

I disapproved. "You won't get anywhere that way. Have you considered that maybe Neptune and Pluto are twin planets? Even the best telescopes don't give a good view of Pluto. This may actually be Pluto, satellite and all. So tell him we'll go to Neptune."

Sam made a disgusted sound in his throat, jabbed his finger at the eighth circle.

"It's no good, though," he growled. "Something's screwy. Ten to one we wind up on Pluto anyway."

We did, a half-hour later, that same early Tuesday morning. There was no mistaking

it. It definitely was Pluto. Neptune has a satellite—Triton. This cold grey barren world had no satellite at all.

We just looked at it, then at each other, then back at the planet again. There was no comment we could make. When we asked for one planet we were taken to the other. Something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong. But we went ahead with our plan, skimmed the ship a few miles over the surface of the planet, the "signals" automatically flashing out as the ship turned on its axis.

Down on Earth, Sam would see those signals, and with any luck at all, we'd have created a simple, *truthful* Tuesday which at midnight would slip right into Wednesday without any fuss. We hoped.

In our hearts, we knew the mix-up in planets had not been explained, and that, too, we might have left something undone in our efforts to create a Tuesday which would fit into the scheme of things. But we knew of no other solution, and so Sam pointed to the third circle on the chart—Earth—and we went zipping back across the billions of miles.

I was standing absently behind the pilot's chair when it happened. Sam and I were careful to keep our tube-weapons handy, because we were both apprehensive of the pilot. We felt he was awaiting his chance. We weren't wrong. And we would have used our weapons on the little man if we had a chance. We didn't have that chance. Something seemed to strike the spaceship a violent blow. We staggered back, completely off balance, and slammed against the bulkheads. The pilot must have sent a signal—and the police had jumped us.

The little man from the future was apparently ready for just that. He whipped out of his seat, used the ship's motion to throw himself clear across the room at us. Before Sam knew what was going on, the neckless man had wrenched the tube from his hand and pointed it squarely at his heart. I was frozen with horror.

But frozen not for long. The ship wallowed abruptly, sharply, in the other direction. I plummeted through the air, in the last fraction of a second took advantage of my momentum. I reached, swinging one arm around the little man's head as I went past. We somersaulted, smashed into the instrument board, then came down in a tangle. I

got on top. My fist came down. The little man relaxed with a grunt and was still.

Sam yelled gleefully, "*Socko!* Ivan, my boy, I didn't know you had it in you!" He hauled me to my feet with one mighty motion of his arms. "Let's s-s-scam!"

No need to tell me where we should scam to. We burst out of the control room, hurled ourselves down the tipsy corridor. We heard sounds, piping, urgent voices. Far down the corridor a rectangle of light suddenly appeared in the overheads. Through that rectangle a half-dozen green-clad little men of the future dropped, and they saw us first thing. They began running our way, with a quiet certainty that sent chills up my spine.

It was touch and go. But our legs got us to the door of the cabin where the time-machine was parked a few seconds ahead of them. By the time Sam kicked the door open, though, the advantage was lost. I yelled, fired, missed—and I saw snapping purple fire emanate from one weapon held in a tiny white hand. The purple fire hit me, coiled around me like a rope. A stifling paralysis gripped me.

Sam picked me up by my belt and literally threw me into the time-machine. My mind hazed. Sank. Blackness enclosed it.

**M**Y EYES OPENED. I was lying full-length on the cold cement floor of my basement laboratory. Through two small windows I saw the black of night, and a couple stars. To my left was the time-machine. To my right was the open door of the laboratory, and I could see the first steps of the stairs leading up to the hall. I heard Sam dialing the telephone in the hall.

Suddenly, "*Morning News!*" said Sam. "I want the time. And the date. And the day. . . I'm sorry, I realize that but—Thanks! . . . June 2nd! Tuesday! But—it's midnight? *Almost* midnight—?"

I was on my feet. I was up the stairs. Sweat was rolling down Sam's face. He said hoarsely, "Then hold on just a few seconds more. I'll do anything. I'll subscribe to your paper, I'll deliver 'em—You see, it's this way—It *is*? IT IS!"

He fumbled the receiver onto the hook, sat down on the first stair, grinning crookedly.

I yelled, "Well? *What* is it!"

"It's a little past midnight," said Sam. "It's all over. It's Wednesday. Tuesday just changed into Wednesday. Tuesday is no more. I-Ivan, W-Wednesday w-will always be my favorite d-d-day!"

Well, it was over. Sam had landed in Tuesday, which had changed over to Wednesday in a natural, normal way. But the main mystery remained. Why had those Tuesdays, metaphorically speaking, had a squabble about Pluto and Neptune at all?

"We can explain part of it," I decided. "The first Tuesday you borrowed my time-machine and went into the future—alone—and went through the same run of events you and I later went through together. The pilot took you to Neptune instead of Pluto. Therefore the second *you* on Earth saw those so-called 'signals' coming from Neptune. So you came and borrowed my time-machine on the second Tuesday, went into the future, etcetera, etcetera, and the pilot took you to the wrong planet again. And so on, except that on the fifth Tuesday I accompanied you. It was that pilot's fault."

"Here it comes," Sam said. "But how did the pilot get Pluto and Neptune mixed up when we definitely *asked* for them? . . . Say! Wait a minute!" Sam jumped up as if he'd been shot. He clapped his hands over his head and rolled his eyes to heaven. "Oh, man! I'm plumb idiotic. The answer was staring us in the face all the time. Don't you get it, Ivan? We never did ask for those planets by name. We designated *orbits!*"

"But what difference—?"

"Plenty! It makes plenty of difference. After all, Ivan, that was the future. At the exact time in the future, Neptune *was* the ninth planet—and Pluto *was* the eighth."

I said feebly, "It doesn't make sense. Why should they get mixed up that way?"

"Mixed up from *your* viewpoint," Sam chortled, "but not from the pilot's. Remember I told you Pluto has a highly elliptical orbit? Well, it's so elliptical that every few hundred years Pluto dips inside Neptune's orbit, and it becomes the eighth planet while Neptune becomes the ninth. Pluto had probably been the eighth planet so long the pilot had forgotten it was ever the ninth. Or never knew it!"

We sat there, breathing deep. The air was Wednesday's. It tasted good.

# THE CREATURES



*Ahead of them lay the ship. Sim could not believe they were so near.*

**D**URING THE NIGHT, Sim was born. He lay wailing upon the cold cave stones. His blood beat through him a thousand pulses each minute. He grew, steadily.

Into his mouth his mother with feverish hands put the food. The nightmare of living was begun. Almost instantly at birth his eyes grew alert, and then, without half understanding why, filled with bright, insistent terror. He gagged upon the food, choked and wailed. He looked about, blindly.

There was a thick fog. It cleared. The outlines of the cave appeared. And a man

loomed up, insane and wild and terrible. A man with a dying face. Old, withered by winds, baked like adobe in the heat. The man was crouched in a far corner of the cave, his eyes whitening to one side of his face, listening to the far wind trumpeting up above on the frozen night planet.

Sim's mother, trembling, now and again, staring at the man, fed Sim pebble-fruits, valley-grasses and ice-nipples broken from the cavern entrances, and eating, eliminating, eating again, he grew larger, larger.

The man in the corner of the cave was his father! The man's eyes were all that was alive in his face. He held a crude

# THAT TIME FORGOT

By RAY BRADBURY

**Mad, impossible world! Sun-blasted by day, cold-wracked by night—and life condensed by radiation into eight days! Sim eyed the Ship—if he only dared reach it and escape! . . . but it was more than half an hour distant—the limit of life itself!**

stone dagger in his withered hands and his jaw hung loose and senseless.

Then, with a widening focus, Sim saw the old people sitting in the tunnel beyond this living quarter. And as he watched, they began to die.

Their agonies filled the cave. They melted like waxen images, their faces collapsed inward on their sharp bones, their teeth protruded. One minute their faces were mature, fairly smooth, alive, electric. The next minute a dessication and burning away of their flesh occurred.

Sim thrashed in his mother's grasp. She held him. "No, no," she soothed him, quietly, earnestly, looking to see if this, too, would cause her husband to rise again.

With a soft swift padding of naked feet, Sim's father ran across the cave. Sim's mother screamed. Sim felt himself torn loose from her grasp. He fell upon the stones, rolling, shrieking with his new, moist lungs!

The webbed face of his father jerked over him, the knife was poised. It was like one of those pre-natal nightmares he'd had while still in his mother's flesh. In the next few blazing, impossible instants questions flicked through his brain. The knife was high, suspended, ready to destroy him. But the whole question of life in this cave, the dying people, the withering and the insanity, surged through Sim's new, small head. How was it that he understood? A newborn child? Can a newborn child think, see, understand, interpret? No. It was wrong! It was impossible. Yet it was happening! To him. He had been alive an hour now. And in the next instant perhaps dead!

His mother flung herself upon the back of his father, and beat down the weapon. Sim caught the terrific backwash of emotion from both their conflicting minds. "Let me kill him!" shouted the father,

breathing harshly, sobbingly. "What has he to live for?"

"No, no!" insisted the mother, and her body, frail and old as it was, stretched across the huge body of the father, tearing at his weapon. "He must live! There may be a future for him! He may live longer than us, and be young!"

The father fell back against a stone crib. Lying there, staring, eyes glittering, Sim saw another figure inside that stone crib. A girl-child, quietly feeding itself, moving its delicate hands to procure food. His sister.

The mother wrenched the dagger from her husband's grasp, stood up, weeping and pushing back her cloud of stiffening gray hair. Her mouth trembled and jerked. "I'll kill you!" she said, glaring down at her husband. "Leave my children alone."

The old man spat tiredly, bitterly, and looked vacantly into the stone crib, at the little girl. "One-eighth of her life's over, already," he gasped. "And she doesn't know it. What's the use?"

As Sim watched, his own mother seemed to shift and take a tortured, smoke-like form. The thin bony face broke out into a maze of wrinkles. She was shaken with pain and had to sit by him, shuddering and cuddling the knife to her shriveled breasts. She, like the old people in the tunnel, was aging, dying.

Sim cried steadily. Everywhere he looked was horror. A mind came to meet his own. Instinctively he glanced toward the stone crib. Dark, his sister, returned his glance. Their minds brushed like straying fingers. He relaxed somewhat. He began to learn.

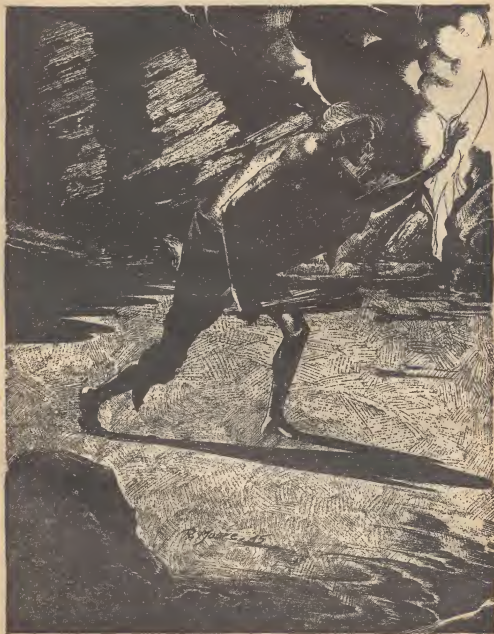
The father sighed, shut his lids down over his green eyes. "Feed the child," he said, exhaustedly. "Hurry. It is almost dawn and it is our last day of living, woman. Feed him. Make him grow."

Sim quieted, and images, out of the terror, floated to him.

This was a planet next to the sun. The nights burned with cold, the days were like torches of fire. It was a violent, impossible world. The people lived in the cliffs to escape the incredible ice and the day of flame. Only at dawn and sunset was the air breath-sweet, flower-strong, and then the cave peoples brought their

children out into a stony, barren valley. At dawn the ice thawed into creeks and rivers, at sunset the day-fires died and cooled. In the intervals of even, livable temperature the people lived, ran, played, loved, free of the caverns; all life on the planet jumped, burst into life. Plants grew instantly, birds were flung like pellets across the sky. Smaller, legged animal life rushed frantically through the rocks;

*With a soft padding of naked feet Sim's father ran across the cave.*







everything tried to get its living down in the brief hour of respite.

It was an unbearable planet. Sim understood this, a matter of hours after birth. Racial memory bloomed in him. He would live his entire life in the caves, with two hours a day outside. Here, in stone channels of air he would talk, talk incessantly with his people, sleep never, think, think and lie upon his back, dreaming; but never sleeping.

*And he would live exactly eight days.*

THE violence of this thought evacuated his bowels. Eight days. Eight *short* days. It was wrong, impossible, but a fact. Even while in his mother's flesh some racial knowledge had told him he was being formed rapidly, shaped and propelled out swiftly.

Birth was quick as a knife. Childhood was over in a flash. Adolescence was a sheet of lightning. Manhood was a dream, maturity a myth, old age an inescapably quick reality, death a swift certainty.

Eight days from now he'd stand half-blind, withering, dying, as his father now stood, staring uselessly at his own wife and child.

This day was an eighth part of his total life! He must enjoy every second of it. He must search his parents thoughts for knowledge.

*Because in a few hours they'd be dead.*

This was so impossibly unfair. Was this all of life? In his prenatal state hadn't he dreamed of *long* lives, valleys not of blasted stone but green foliage and temperate clime? Yes! And if he'd dreamed then there must be truth in the visions. How could he seek and find the long life? Where? And how could he accomplish a life mission that huge and depressing in eight short, vanishing days?

How had his people gotten into such a condition?

As if at a button pressed, he saw an image. Metal seeds, blown across space from a distant green world, fighting with long flames, crashing on this bleak planet. From their shattered hulls tumble men and women.

When? Long ago. Ten thousand days. The crash victims hid in the cliffs from the sun. Fire, ice and floods washed away the wreckage of the huge metal seeds. The

victims were shaped and beaten like iron upon a forge. Solar radiations drenched them. Their pulses quickened, two hundred, five hundred, a thousand beats a minute. Their skins thickened, their blood changed. Old age came rushing. Children were born in the caves. Swifter, swifter, swifter the process. Like all this world's wild life, the men and women from the crash lived and died in a week, leaving children to do likewise.

So this is life, thought Sim. It was not spoken in his mind, for he knew no words, he knew only images, old memory, an awareness, a telepathy that could penetrate flesh, rock, metal. So I'm the five thousandth in a long line of futile sons? What can I do to save myself from dying eight days from now? Is there escape?

His eyes widened, another image came to focus.

Beyond this valley of cliffs, on a low mountain lay a perfect, unscarred metal seed. A metal ship, not rusted or touched by the avalanches. The ship was deserted, whole, intact. It was the only ship of all these that had crashed that was still a unit, still usable. 'But it was so far away. There was no one in it to help. This ship, then, on the far mountain, was the destiny toward which he would grow. There was his only hope of escape.

His mind flexed.

In this cliff, deep down in a confinement of solitude, worked a handful of scientists. To these men, when he was old enough and wise enough, he must go. They, too, dreamed of escape, of long life, of green valleys and temperate weathers. They, too, stared longingly at that distant ship upon its high mountain, its metal so perfect it did not rust or age.

The cliff groaned.

Sim's father lifted his eroded, lifeless face.

"Dawn's coming," he said.

## II

MORNING relaxed the mighty granite cliff muscles. It was the time of the Avalanche.

The tunnels echoed to running bare feet. Adults, children pushed with eager, hungry eyes toward the outside dawn. From far out, Sim heard a rumble of rock, a scream,

a silence. Avalanches fell into valley. Stones that had been biding their time, not quite ready to fall, for a million years let go their bulks, and where they had begun their journey as single boulders they smashed upon the valley floor in a thousand shrapnels and friction-heated nuggets.

Every morning at least one person was caught in the downpour.

The cliff people dared the avalanches. It added one more excitement to their lives, already too short, too headlong, too dangerous.

Sim felt himself seized up by his father. He was carried brusquely down the tunnel for a thousand yards, to where the daylight appeared. There was a shining insane light in his father's eyes. Sim could not move. He sensed what was going to happen. Behind his father, his mother hurried, bringing with her the little sister, Dark. "Wait! Be careful!" she cried to her husband.

Sim felt his father crouch, listening.

High in the cliff was a tremor, a shivering.

"Now!" bellowed his father, and leaped out.

An avalanche fell down at them!

Sim had accelerated impressions of plunging walls, dust, confusion. His mother screamed! There was a jolting, a plunging.

With one last step, Sim's father hurried him forward into the day. The avalanche thundered behind him. The mouth of the cave, where mother and Dark stood back out of the way, was choked with rubble and two boulders that weighed a hundred pounds each.

The storm thunder of the avalanche passed away to a trickle of sand. Sim's father burst out into laughter. "Made it! By the Gods! Made it alive!" And he looked scornfully at the cliff and spat. "Pagh!"

Mother and sister Dark struggled through the rubble. She cursed her husband. "Fool! You might have killed Sim!"

"I may yet," retorted the father.

Sim was not listening. He was fascinated with the remains of an avalanche aftront of the next tunnel. A blood stain trickled out from under a rise of boulders, soaking into the ground. There was noth-

ing else to be seen. Someone else had lost the game.

Dark ran ahead on lithe, supple feet, naked and certain.

The valley air was like a wine filtered between mountains. The heaven was a restive blue; not the pale scorched atmosphere of full day, nor the bloated, bruised black-purple of night, a-riot with sickly shining stars.

This was a tide pool. A place where waves of varying and violent temperatures struck, receded. Now the tide pool was quiet, cool, and its life moved abroad.

Laughter! Far away, Sim heard it. Why laughter? How could any of his people find time for laughing? Perhaps later he would discover why.

The valley suddenly blushed with impulsive color. Plant-life, thawing in the precipitant dawn, shoved out from most unexpected sources. It flowered as you watched. Pale green tendrils appeared on scoured rocks. Seconds later, ripe globes of fruit twitched upon the blade-tips. Father gave Sim over to mother and harvested the momentary, volatile crop, thrust scarlet, blue, yellow fruits into a fur sack which hung at his waist. Mother tugged at the moist new grasses, laid them on Sim's tongue.

His senses were being honed to a fine edge. He stored knowledge thirstily. He understood love, marriage, customs, anger, pity, rage, selfishness, shadings and subtleties, realities and reflections. One thing suggested another. The sight of green plant life whirled his mind like a gyroscope, seeking balance in a world where lack of time for explanations made a mind seek and interpret on its own. The soft burden of food gave him knowledge of his system, of energy, of movement. Like a bird newly cracking its way from a shell, he was almost a unit, complete, all-knowing. Heredity had done all this for him. He grew excited with his ability.

THEY walked, mother, father and the two children, smelling the smells, watching the birds bounce from wall to wall of the valley like scurrying pebbles and suddenly the father said a strange thing:

"Remember?"

Remember what? Sim lay cradled. Was

it any effort for them to remember when they'd lived only seven days!

The husband and wife looked at each other.

"Was it only three days ago?" said the woman, her body shaking, her eyes closing to think. "I can't believe it. It is so unfair." She sobbed, then drew her hand across her face and bit her parched lips. The wind played at her gray hair. "Now is my turn to cry. An hour ago it was you!"

"An hour is half a life."

"Come," she took her husband's arm. "Let us look at everything, because it will be our last looking."

"The sun'll be up in a few minutes," said the old man. "We must turn back now."

"Just one more moment," pleaded the woman.

"The sun will catch us."

"Let it catch me then!"

"You don't mean that."

"I mean nothing, nothing at all," cried the woman.

The sun was coming fast. The green in the valley burnt away. Searing wind blasted from over the cliffs. Far away where sun bolts hammered battlements of cliff, the huge stone faces shook their contents; those avalanches not already powdered down, were now released and fell like mantles.

"Dark!" shouted the father. The girl sprang over the warm floor of the valley, answering, her hair a black flag behind her. Hands full of green fruits, she joined them.

The sun rimmed the horizon with flame, the air convulsed dangerously with it, and whistled.

The cave people bolted, shouting, picking up their fallen children, bearing vast loads of fruit and grass with them back to their deep hideouts. In moments the valley was bare. Except for one small child someone had forgotten. He was running far out on the flatness, but he was not strong enough, and the engulfing heat was drifting down from the cliffs even as he was half across the valley.

Flowers were burnt into effigies, grasses sucked back into rocks like singed snakes. flower seeds whirled and fell in the sudden furnace blast of wind, sown far into gulches and crannies, ready to blossom at sun-

set tonight, and then go to seed and die again.

Sim's father watched that child running, alone, out on the floor of the valley. He and his wife and Dark and Sim were safe in the mouth of their tunnel.

"He'll never make it," said father. "Do not watch him, woman. It's not a good thing to watch."

They turned away. All except Sim, whose eyes had caught a glint of metal far away. His heart hammered in him, and his eyes blurred. Far away, atop a low mountain, one of those metal seeds from space reflected a dazzling ripple of light! It was like one of his intra-embryo dreams fulfilled! A metal space seed, intact, undamaged, lying on a mountain! There was his future! There was his hope for survival! There was where he would go in a few days, when he was—strange thought—a grown man!

The sun plunged into the valley like molten lava.

The little running child screamed, the sun burned, and the screaming stopped.

Sim's mother walked painfully, with sudden age, down the tunnel, paused, reached up, broke off two last icicles that had formed during the night. She handed one to her husband, kept the other. "We will drink one last toast. To you, to the children."

"To *you*," he nodded to her. "To the children." They lifted the icicles. The warmth melted the ice down into their thirsty mouths.

ALL day the sun seemed to blaze and erupt into the valley. Sim could not see it, but the vivid pictorials in his parents' minds were sufficient evidence of the nature of the day fire. The light ran like mercury, sizzling and roasting the caves, poking inward, but never penetrating deeply enough. It lighted the caves. It made the hollows of the cliff comfortably warm.

Sim fought to keep his parents young. But no matter how hard he fought with mind and image, they became like mummies before him. His father seemed to dissolve from one stage of oldness to another. This is what will happen to me soon, though Sim in terror.

Sim grew upon himself. He felt the

digestive-eliminary movements of his body. He was fed every minute, he was continually swallowing, feeding. He began to fit words to images and processes. Such a word was love. It was not an abstraction, but a process, a stir of breath, a smell of morning air, a flutter of heart, the curve of arm holding him, the look in the suspended face of his mother. He saw the processes, then searched behind her suspended face and there was the word, in her brain, ready to use. His throat prepared to speak. Life was pushing him, rushing him along toward oblivion.

He sensed the expansion of his fingernails, the adjustments of his cells, the profusion of his hair, the multiplication of his bones and sinew, the grooving of the soft pale wax of his brain. His brain at birth as clear as a circle of ice, innocent, unmarked, was, an instant later, as if hit with a thrown rock, cracked and marked and patterned in a million crevices of thought and discovery.

His sister, Dark, ran in and out with other little hothouse children, forever eating. His mother trembled over him, not eating, she had no appetite, her eyes were webbed shut.

"Sunset," said his father, at last.

The day was over. The light faded, a wind sounded.

His mother arose. "I want to see the outside world once more . . . just once more. . . ." She stared blindly, shivering.

His father's eyes were shut, he lay against the wall.

"I cannot rise," he whispered faintly. "I cannot."

"Dark!" The mother croaked, the girl came running. "Here," and Sim was handed to the girl. "Hold to Sim, Dark, feed him, care for him." She gave Sim one last fondling touch.

Dark said not a word, holding Sim, her great green eyes shining wetly.

"Go now," said the mother. "Take him out into the sunset time. Enjoy yourselves. Pick foods, eat. Play."

Dark walked away without looking back. Sim twisted in her grasp, looking over her shoulder with unbelieving, tragic eyes. He cried out and somehow summoned from his lips the first word of his existence, a "Why . . . ?"

He saw his mother stiffen. "The child spoke!"

"Aye," said his father. "Did you hear what he said?"

"I heard," said the mother quietly.

The last thing Sim saw of his living parents was his mother weakly, swayingly, slowly moving across the floor to lie beside her silent husband. That was the last time he ever saw them move.

#### IV

THE night came and passed and then started the second day.

The bodies of all those who had died during the night were carried in a funeral procession to the top of a small hill. The procession was long, the bodies numerous.

Dark walked in the procession, holding the newly walking Sim by one hand. Only an hour before dawn Sim had learned to walk.

At the top of the hill, Sim saw once again the far off metal seed. Nobody ever looked at it, or spoke of it. Why? Was there some reason? Was it a mirage? Why did they not run toward it? Worship it? Try to get to it and fly away into space?

The funeral words were spoken. The bodies were placed upon the ground where the sun, in a few minutes, would cremate them.

The procession then turned and ran down the hill, eager to have their few minutes of free time running and playing and laughing in the sweet air.

Dark and Sim, chattering like birds, feeding among the rocks, exchanged what they knew of life. He was in his second day, she in her third. They were driven, as always, by the mercurial speed of their lives.

Another piece of his life opened wide.

Fifty young men ran down from the cliffs, holding sharp stones and rock daggers in their thick hands. Shouting, they ran off toward distant black, low lines of small rock cliffs.

"War!"

The thought stood in Sim's brain. It shocked and beat at him. These men were running to fight, to kill, over there in those small black cliffs where other people lived.

But why? Wasn't life short enough without fighting, killing?

From a great distance he heard the sound of conflict, and it made his stomach cold. "Why, Dark, why?"

Dark didn't know. Perhaps they would understand tomorrow. Now, there was the business of eating to sustain and support their lives. Watching Dark was like seeing a lizard forever flickering its pink tongue, forever hungry.

Pale children ran on all sides of them. One beetle-like boy scuttled up the rocks, knocking Sim aside, to take from him a particularly luscious red berry he had found growing under an outcrop.

The child ate hastily of the fruit before Sim could gain his feet. Then Sim hurled himself unsteadily, the two of them fell in a ridiculous jumble, rolling, until Dark pried them, squalling, apart.

Sim bled. A part of him stood off, like a god, and said, "This should not be. Children should not be this way. It is wrong!"

Dark slapped the little intruding boy away. "Get on!" she cried. "What's your name, bad one?"

"Chion!" laughed the boy. "Chion, Chion, Chion!"

Sim glared at him with all the ferocity in his small, unskilled features. He choked. This was his enemy. It was as if he'd waited for an enemy of person as well as scene. He had already understood the avalanches, the heat, the cold, the shortness of life, but these were things of places, of scene—mute, extravagant manifestations of unthinking nature, not motivated save by gravity and radiation. Here, now, in this strident Chion he recognized a thinking enemy!

Chion darted off, turned at a distance, tauntingly crying:

"Tomorrow I will be big enough to kill you!"

And he vanished around a rock.

More children ran, giggling, by Sim. Which of them would be friends, enemies? How could friends and enemies come about in this impossible, quick life time? There was no time to make either, was there?

Dark, as if knowing his thoughts, drew him away. As they searched for desired foods, she whispered fiercely in his ear. "Enemies are made over things like stolen foods; gifts of long grasses make friends.

Enemies come, too, from opinions and thoughts. In five seconds you've made an enemy for life. Life's so short enemies must be made quickly." And she laughed with an irony strange for one so young, who was growing older before her rightful time. "You must fight to protect yourself. Others, superstitious ones, will try killing you. There is a belief, a ridiculous belief, that if one kills another, the murderer partakes of the life energy of the slain, and therefore will live an extra day. You see? As long as that is believed, you're in danger."

But Sim was not listening. Bursting from a flock of delicate girls who tomorrow would be tall, quieter, and who day after that would gain breasts and the next day take husbands, Sim caught sight of one small girl whose hair was a violet blue flame.

She ran past, brushed Sim, their bodies touched. Her eyes, white as silver coins, shone at him. He knew then that he'd found a friend, a love, a wife, one who'd a week from now lie with him atop the funeral pyre as sunlight undressed their flesh from bone.

Only the glance, but it held them in mid-motion, one instant.

"Your name?" he shouted after her.

"Lyte!" she called laughingly back.

"I'm Sim," he answered, confused and bewildered.

"Sim!" she repeated it, flashing on. "I'll remember!"

Dark nudged his ribs. "Here, eat," she said to the distracted boy. "Eat or you'll never get big enough to catch her."

From nowhere, Chion appeared, running by. "Lyte!" he mocked, dancing malevolently along and away. "Lyte! I'll remember Lyte, too!"

Dark stood tall and reed slender, shaking her dark ebony clouds of hair, sadly. "I see your life before you, little Sim. You'll need weapons soon to fight for this Lyte one. Now, hurry—the sun's coming!"

They ran back to the caves.

ONE-FOURTH of his life was over! Babyhood was gone. He was now a young boy! Wild rains lashed the valley at nightfall. He watched new river channels cut in the valley, out past the moun-





tain of the metal seed. He stored the knowledge for later use. Each night there was a new river, a bed newly cut.

"What's beyond the valley?" wondered Sim.

"No one's ever been beyond it," explained Dark. "All who tried to reach the plain were frozen to death or burnt. The only land we know's within half an hour's run. Half an hour out and half an hour back."

"No one has ever reached the metal seed, then?"

Dark scoffed. "The Scientists, they try. Silly fools. They don't know enough to stop. It's no use. It's too far."

The Scientists. The word stirred him. He had almost forgotten the vision he had short hours after birth. His voice was eager. "Where are the Scientists?" he demanded.

Dark looked away from him, "I wouldn't tell you if I knew. They'd kill you, experimenting! I don't want you joining them! Live your life, don't cut it in half trying to reach that silly metal thing on the mountain."

"I'll find out where they are from somewhere else, then!"

"No one'll tell you! They hate the Scientists. You'll have to find them on your own. And then what? Will you save us? Yes, save us, little boy!" Her

face was sullen; already half her life was gone, her breasts were beginning to shape. Tomorrow she must divine how best to live her youth, her love, and she knew no way to fully plumb the depths of passion in so short a space.

"We can't sit and talk and eat," he protested. "And *nothing* else."

"There's always love," she retorted acidly. "It helps one forget. Gods, yes," she spat it out. "Love!"

SIM ran through the tunnels, seeking. Sometimes he half imagined where the Scientists were. But then a flood of angry thought from those around him, when he asked the direction to the Scientists' cave, washed over him in confusion and resentment. After all, it was the Scientists' fault that they had been placed upon this terrible world! Sim flinched under the bombardment of oaths and curses.

Quietly he took his seat in a central chamber with the children to listen to the grown men talk. This was the time of education, the Time of Talking. No matter how he chafed at delay, or how great his impatience, even though life slipped fast from him and death approached like a black meteor, he knew his mind needed knowledge. Tonight, then, was the night of school. But he sat uneasily. Only five more days of life.

Chion sat across from Sim, his thin-mouthed face arrogant.

Lyte appeared between the two. The last few hours had made her firmer footed, gentler, taller. Her hair shone brighter. She smiled as she sat beside Sim, ignoring Chion. And Chion became rigid at this and ceased eating.

The dialogue crackled, filled the room. Swift as heart beats, one thousand, two thousand words a minute. Sim learned, his head filled. He did not shut his eyes, but lapsed into a kind of dreaming that was almost intra-embryonic in lassitude and drowsy vividness. In the faint background the words were spoken, and they wove a tapestry of knowledge in his head.

HE DREAMED of green meadows free of stones, all grass, round and rolling and rushing easily toward a dawn with no taint of freezing, merciless cold or smell of boiled rock or scorched monument. He walked across the green meadow. Overhead the metal seeds flew by in a heaven that was a steady, even temperature. Things were slow, slow, slow.

Birds lingered upon gigantic trees that took a hundred, two hundred, five thousand days to grow. Everything remained in its place, the birds did not flicker nervously at a hint of sun, nor did the trees suck back frightenedly when a ray of sunlight poured over them.

In this dream people strolled, they rarely ran, the heart rhythm of them was evenly languid, not jerking and insane. Their kisses were long and lingering, not the parched mouthings and twitchings of lovers who had eight days to live. The grass remained, and did not burn away in torches. The dream people talked always of tomorrow and living and not tomorrow and dying. It all seemed so familiar that when Sim felt someone take his hand he thought it simply another part of the dream.

Lyte's hand lay inside his own. "Dreaming? she asked.

"Yes."

"Things are balanced. Our minds, to even things, to balance the unfairness of our living, go back in on ourselves, to find what there is that is good to see."

He beat his hand against the stone floor

again and again. "It does not make things fair! I hate it! It reminds me that there is something better, something I have missed! Why can't we be ignorant! Why can't we live and die without knowing that this is an abnormal living?" And his breath rushed harshly from his half-open, constricted mouth.

"There is purpose in everything," said Lyte. "This give us purpose, makes us work, plan, try to find a way."

His eyes were hot emeralds in his face. "I walked up a hill of grass, very slowly," he said.

"The same hill of grass I walked an hour ago?" asked Lyte.

"Perhaps. Close enough to it. The dream is better than the reality." He flexed his eyes, narrowed them. "I watched people and they did not eat."

"Or talk?"

"Or talk, either. And we always are eating, always talking. Sometimes those people in the dream sprawled with their eyes shut, not moving a muscle."

As Lyte stared down into his face a terrible thing happened. He imagined her face blackening, wrinkling, twisting into knots of agedness. The hair blew out like snow about her ears, the eyes were like discolored coins caught in a web of lashes. Her teeth sank away from her lips, the delicate fingers hung like charred twigs from her atrophied wrists. Her beauty was consumed and wasted even as he watched, and when he seized her, in terror, he cried out, for he imagined his own hand corroded, and he choked back a cry.

"Sim, what's wrong?"

The saliva in his mouth dried at the taste of the words.

"Five more days . . ."

"The Scientists."

Sim started. Who'd spoken? In the dim light a tall man talked. "The Scientists crashed us on this world, and now have wasted thousands of lives and time. It's no use. It's no use. Tolerate them but give them none of your time. You only live once, remember."

Where were these hated Scientists? Now, after the Learning, the Time of Talking, he was ready to find them. Now, at least, he knew enough to begin his fight for freedom, for the ship!

"Sim, where're you going?"

But Sim was gone. The echo of his running feet died away down a shaft of polished stone.

IT seemed that half the night was wasted. He blundered into a dozen dead ends. Many times he was attacked by the insane young men who wanted his life energy. Their superstitious ravings echoed after him. The gashes of their hungry fingernails covered his body.

He found what he looked for.

A half dozen men gathered in a small basalt cave deep down in the cliff lode. On a table before them lay objects which, though unfamiliar, struck harmonious chords in Sim.

The Scientists worked in sets, old men doing important work, young men learning, asking questions; and at their feet were three small children. They were a process. Every eight days there was an entirely new set of scientists working on any one problem. The amount of work done was terribly inadequate. They grew old, fell dead just when they were beginning their creative period. The creative time of any one individual was perhaps a matter of twelve hours out of his entire span. Three-quarters of one's life was spent learning, a brief interval of creative power, then senility, insanity, death.

The men turned as Sim entered.

"Don't tell me we have a recruit?" said the eldest of them.

"I don't believe it," said another, younger one. "Chase him away. He's probably one of those war-mongers."

"No, no," objected the elder one, moving with little shuffles of his bare feet toward Sim. "Come in, come in, boy." He had friendly eyes, slow eyes, unlike those of the swift inhabitants of the upper caves. Grey and quiet. "What do you want?"

Sim hesitated, lowered his head, unable to meet the quiet, gentle gaze. "I want to live," he whispered.

The old man laughed quietly. He touched Sim's shoulder. "Are you a new breed? Are you sick?" he queried of Sim, half-seriously. "Why aren't you playing? Why aren't you readying yourself for the time of love and marriage and children? Don't you know that to-

morrow night you'll be an adolescent? Don't you realize that if you are not careful you'll miss all of life?" He stopped.

Sim moved his eyes back and forth with each query. He blinked at the instruments on the table top. "Shouldn't I be here?" he asked, naively.

"Certainly," roared the old man, sternly. "But it's a miracle you are. We've had no volunteers from the rank and file for a thousand days! We've had to breed our own scientists, a closed unit! Count us! Six! Six men! And three children! Are we not overwhelming?" The old man spat upon the stone floor. "We ask for volunteers and the people shout back at us, 'Get someone else!' or 'We have no time!' And you know why they say that?"

"No." Sim flinched.

"Because they're selfish. They'd like to live longer, yes, but they know that anything they do cannot possibly insure their *own* lives any extra time. It might guarantee longer life to some future offspring of theirs. But they won't give up their love, their brief youth, give up one interval of sunset or sunrise!"

Sim leaned against the table, earnestly. "I understand."

"You do?" The old man stared at him blindly. He sighed and slapped the child's thigh, gently. "Yes, of course, you do. It's too much to expect anyone to understand, any more. You're rare."

The others moved in around Sim and the old man.

"I am Dienc. Tomorrow night Cort here will be in my place. I'll be dead by then. And the night after that someone else will be in Cort's place, and then you, if you work and believe—but first, I give you a chance. Return to your playmates if you want. There is someone you love? Return to her. Life is short. Why should you care for the unborn to come? You have a right to youth. Go now, if you want. Because if you stay you'll have no time for anything but working and growing old and dying at your work. But it is good work. Well?"

Sim looked at the tunnel. From a distance the wind roared and blew, the smells of cooking and the patter of naked feet sounded, and the laughter of lovers was an increasingly good thing to hear. He

shook his head, impatiently, and his eyes were wet.

"I will stay," he said.

## VI

THE third night and third day passed. It was the fourth night. Sim was drawn into their living. He learned about that metal seed upon the top of the far mountain. He heard of the original seeds—things called "ships" that crashed and how the survivors hid and dug in the cliffs, grew old swiftly and in their scrabbling to barely survive, forgot all science. Knowledge of mechanical things had no chance of survival in such a volcanic civilization. There was only NOW for each human.

Yesterday didn't matter, tomorrow stared them vividly in their very faces. But somehow the radiations that had forced their aging had also induced a kind of telepathic communication whereby philosophies and impressions were absorbed by the new born. Racial memory, growing instinctively, preserved memories of another time.

"Why don't we go to that shop on the mountain?" asked Sim.

"It is too far. We would need protection from the sun," explained Dienc.

"Have you tried to make protection?"

"Salves and ointments, suits of stone and bird-wing and, recently, crude metals. None of which worked. In ten thousand more life times perhaps we'll have made a metal in which will flow cool water to protect us on the march to the ship. But we work so slowly, so blindly. This morning, mature, I took up my instruments. Tomorrow, dying, I lay them down. What can one man do in one day? If we had ten thousand men, the problem would be solved . . ."

"I will go to the ship," said Sim.

"Then you will die," said the old man. A silence had fallen on the room at Sim's words. Then the men stared at Sim. "You are a very selfish boy."

"Selfish!" cried Sim, resentfully.

The old man patted the air. "Selfish in a way I like. You want to live longer, you'll do anything for that. You will try for the ship. But I tell you it is useless. Yet, if you want to, I cannot stop you.

At least you will not be like those among us who go to war for an extra few days of life."

"War?" asked Sim. "How can there be war here?"

And a shudder ran through him. He did not understand.

"Tomorrow will be time enough for that," said Dienc. "Listen to me, now."

The night passed.

## VII

IT was morning. Lyte came shouting and sobbing down a corridor, and ran full into his arms. She had changed again. She was older, again, more beautiful. She was shaking and she held to him. "Sim, they're coming after you!"

Bare feet marched down the corridor, surged inward at the opening. Chion stood grinning there, taller, too, a sharp rock in either of his hands. "Oh, there you are, Sim!"

"Go away!" cried Lyte savagely whirling on him.

"Not until we take Sim with us," Chion assured her. Then, smiling at Sim. "If that is, he is with us in the fight."

Dienc shuffled forward, his eye weakly fluttering, his bird-like hands fumbling in the air. "Leave!" he shrilled angrily. "This boy is a Scientist now. He works with us."

Chion ceased smiling. "There is better work to be done. We go now to fight the people in the farthest cliffs." His eyes glittered anxiously. "Of course, you will come with us, Sim?"

"No, no!" Lyte clutched at his arm.

Sim patted her shoulder, then turned to Chion. "Why are you attacking these people?"

"There are three extra days for those who go with us to fight."

"Three extra days! Of living?"

Chion nodded firmly. "If we win, we live eleven days instead of eight. The cliffs they live in, something about the mineral in it! Think of it, Sim, three long, good days of life. Will you join us?"

Dienc interrupted. "Get along without him. Sim is my pupil!"

Chion snorted. "Go die, old man. By sunset tonight you'll be charred bone. Who

are you to order us? We are young, we want to live longer."

Eleven days. The words were unbelievable to Sim. Eleven days. Now he understood why there was war. Who wouldn't fight to have his life lengthened by almost half its total. So many more days of youth and love and seeing and living! Yes. Why not, indeed!

"Three extra days," called Dienc, stridently, "if you live to enjoy them. If you're not killed in battle. *If. If!* You have never won yet. You have always lost!"

"But this time," Chion declared sharply, "We'll win!"

Sim was bewildered. "But we are all of the same ancestors. Why don't we all share the best cliffs?"

Chion laughed and adjusted a sharp stone in his hand. "Those who live in the best cliffs think they are better than us. That is always man's attitude when he has power. The cliffs there, besides, are smaller, there's room for only three hundred people in them."

Three extra days.

"I'll go with you," Sim said to Chion.

"Fine!" Chion was very glad, much too glad at the decision.

Dienc gasped.

Sim turned to Dienc and Lyte. "If I fight, and win, I will be half a mile closer to the Ship. And I'll have three extra days in which to strive to reach the Ship. That seems the only thing for me to do."

Dienc nodded, sadly. "It is the only thing. I believe you. Go along now."

"Good-bye," said Sim.

The old man looked surprised, then he laughed as at a little joke on himself. "That's right—I won't see you again, will I? Good-bye, then." And they shook hands.

They went out, Chion, Sim, and Lyte, together, followed by the others, all children growing swiftly into fighting men. And the light in Chion's eyes was not a good thing to see.

LYTE went with him. She chose his rocks for him and carried them. She would not go back, no matter how he pleaded. The sun was just beyond the horizon and they marched across the valley.

"Please, Lyte, go back!"

"And wait for Chion to return?" she said. "He plans that when you die I will be his mate." She shook out her unbelievable blue-white curls of hair defiantly. "But I'll be with you. If you fall, I fall."

Sim's face hardened. He was tall. The world had shrunk during the night. Children packs screamed by hilarious in their food-searching and he looked at them with alien wonder: could it be only four days ago he'd been like these? Strange. There was a sense of many days in his mind, as if he'd really lived a thousand days. There was a dimension of incident and thought so thick, so multi-colored, so richly diverse in his head that it was not to be believed so much could happen in so short a time.

The fighting men ran in clusters of two or three. Sim looked ahead at the rising line of small ebon cliffs. This, then, he said to himself, is my fourth day. And still I am no closer to the Ship, or to anything, not even—he heard the light tread of Lyte beside him—not even to her who bears my weapons and picks me ripe berries.

One-half of his life was gone. Or a third of it—IF he won this battle. *If.*

He ran easily, lifting, letting fall his legs. This is the day of my physical awareness, as I run I feed, as I feed I grow and as I grow I turn eyes to Lyte with a kind of dizzying vertigo. And she looks upon me with the same gentleness of thought. This is the day of our youth. Are we wasting it? Are we losing it on a dream, a folly?

Distantly he heard laughter. As a child he'd questioned it. Now he understood laughter. This particular laughter was made of climbing high rocks and plucking the greenest blades and drinking the headiest vintage from the morning ices and eating of the rock-fruits and tasting of young lips in new appetite.

They neared the cliffs of the enemy.

He saw the slender erectness of Lyte. The new surprise of her white breasts; the neck where if you touched you could time her pulse; the fingers which cupped in your own were animate and supple and never still; the . . .

Lyte snapped her head to one side.

"Look ahead!" she cried. "See what is to come—look only ahead."

He felt that they were racing by part of their lives, leaving their youth on the pathside, without so much as a glance.

"I am blind with looking at stones," he said, running.

"Find new stones, then!"

"I see stones—" His voice grew gentle as the palm of her hand. The landscape floated under him. Everything was like a fine wind, blowing dreamily. "I see stones that make a ravine that lies in a cool shadow where the stone-berries are thick as tears. You touch a boulder and the berries fall in silent red avalanches, and the grass is very tender . . ."

"I do not see it!" She increased her pace, turning her head away.

He saw the floss upon her neck, like the small moss that grows silvery and light on the cool side of pebbles, that stirs if you breathe the lightest breath upon it. He looked upon himself, his hands clenched as he heaved himself forward toward death. Already his hands were veined and youth-swollen.

They were the hands of a young boy whose fingers are made for touching, which are suddenly sensitive and with more surface, and are nervous, and seem not a part of him because they are so big for the slender lengths of his arms. His neck, through which the blood ached and pumped, was building out with age, too, with tiny blue tendrils of veins imbedded and flaring in it.

Lyte handed him food to eat.

"I am not hungry," he said.

"Eat, keep your mouth full," she commanded sharply. "So you will not talk to me this way!"

"If I could only kiss you," he pleaded. "Just one time."

"After the battle there may be time."

"Gods!" He roared, anguished. "Who cares for battles!"

Ahead of them, rocks hailed down, thudding. A man fell with his skull split wide. The war was begun.

Lyte passed the weapons to him. They ran without another word until they entered the killing ground. Then he spoke, not looking at her, his cheeks coloring. "Thank you," he said.

She ducked as a slung stone shot by

her head. "It was not an easy thing for me," she admitted. "Sim! Be careful!"

The boulders began to roll in a synthetic avalanche from the battlements of the enemy!

ONLY one thought was in his mind now. To kill, to lessen the life of someone else so he could live, to gain a foothold here and live long enough to make a stab at the ship. He ducked, he weaved, he clutched stones and hurled them up. His left hand held a flat stone shield with which he diverted the swiftly plummeting rocks. There was a spitting sound everywhere. Lyte ran with him, encouraging him. Two men dropped before him, slain, their breasts cleaved to the bone, their blood springing out in unbelievable founts.

It was a useless conflict. Sim realized instantly how insane the venture was. They could never storm the cliff. A solid wall of rocks rained down. A dozen men dropped with shards of ebony in their brains, a half dozen more showed drooping, broken arms. One screamed and the upthrust white joint of his knee was exposed as the flesh was pulled away by two successive blows of well-aimed granite. Men stumbled over one another.

The muscles in his cheeks pulled tight and he began to wonder why he had ever come. But his raised eyes, as he danced from side to side, weaving and bobbing, sought always the cliffs. He wanted to live there so intensely, to have his chance. He would have to stick it out. But the heart was gone from him.

Lyte screamed piercingly. Sim, his heart panicking, twisted and saw that her hand was loose at the wrist, with an ugly wound bleeding profusely on the back of the knuckles. She clamped it under her armpit to soothe the pain. The anger rose in him and exploded. In his fury he raced forward, throwing his missiles with deadly accuracy. He saw a man topple and flail down, falling from one level to another of the caves, a victim of his shot. He must have been screaming, for his lungs were bursting open and closed and his throat was raw, and the ground spun madly under his racing feet.

The stone that clipped his head sent him reeling and plunging back. He ate sand. The universe dissolved into purple



whorls. He could not get up. He lay and knew that this was his last day, his last time. The battle raged around him, dimly he felt Lyte over him. Her hands cooled his head, she tried to drag him out of range, but he lay gasping and telling her to leave him.

"Stop!" shouted a voice. The whole war seemed to give pause. "Retreat!" commanded the voice swiftly. And as Sim watched, lying upon his side, his comrades turned and fled back toward home.

"The sun is coming, our time is up!" He saw their muscled backs, their moving, tensing, flickering legs go up and down. The dead were left upon the field. The wounded cried for help. But there was no time for the wounded. There was only time for swift men to run the gauntlet home and, their lungs aching and raw with heated air, burst into their tunnels before the sun burnt and killed them.

The sun!

Sim saw another figure racing toward him. It was Chion! Lyte was helping Sim to his feet, whispering helpfully to him. "Can you walk?" she asked. And he groaned and said, "I think so." "Walk then," she said. "Walk slowly, and then faster and faster. We'll make it. Walk slowly, start carefully. We'll make it, I know we will."

Sim got to his feet, stood swaying. Chion raced up, a strange expression cutting lines in his cheeks, his eyes shining with battle. Pushing Lyte abruptly aside he seized upon a rock and dealt Sim a jolting blow upon his ankle that laid wide the flesh. All of this was done quite silently.

Now he stood back, still not speaking, grinning like an animal from the night mountains, his chest panting in and out, looking from the thing he had done, to Lyte, and back. He got his breath. "He'll never make it," he nodded at Sim. "We'll have to leave him here. Come along, Lyte."

Lyte, like a cat-animal, sprang upon Chion, searching for his eyes, shrieking through her exposed, hard-pressed teeth. Her fingers stroked great bloody furrows down Chion's arms and again, instantly, down his neck. Chion, with an oath, sprang away from her. She hurled a rock at him. Grunting, he let it miss him,

then ran off a few yards. "Fool!" he cried, turning to scorn her. "Come along with me. Sim will be dead in a few minutes. Come along!"

Lyte turned her back on him. "I will go if you carry me."

Chion's face changed. His eyes lost their gleaming. "There is no time. We would both die if I carried you."

Lyte looked through and beyond him. "Carry me, then, for that's how I wish it to be."

Without another word, glancing fearfully at the sun, Chion fled. His footsteps sped away and vanished from hearing. "May he fall and break his neck," whispered Lyte, savagely glaring at his form as it skirted a ravine. She returned to Sim. "Can you walk?"

**A** GONIES of pain shot up his leg from the wounded ankle. He nodded ironically. "We could make it to the cave in two hours, walking. I have an idea, Lyte. Carry me." And he smiled with the grim joke.

She took his arm. "Nevertheless we'll walk. Come."

"No," he said. "We're staying here."

"But why?"

"We came to seek a home here. If we walk we will die. I would rather die here. How much time have we?"

Together they measured the sun. "A few minutes," she said, her voice flat and dull. She held close to him.

He looked at her. Lyte, he thought. Tomorrow I would have been a man. My body would have been strong and full and there would have been time with you, a kissing and a touching. Damn, but what kind of life is this where every last instant is drenched with fear and alert with death? Am I to be denied even some bit of real life?

The black rocks of the cliff were paling into deep purples and browns as the sun began to flood the world.

What a fool he was! He should have stayed and worked with Dienc, and thought and dreamed, and at least one time cupped Lyte's mouth with his own.

With the sinews of his neck standing out defiantly he bellowed upward at the cliff holes.

"Send me down one man to do battle!"

Silence. His voice echoed from the cliff. The air was warm.

"It's no use," said Lyte, "They'll pay no attention."

He shouted again. "Hear me!" He stood with his weight on his good foot, his injured left leg throbbing and pulsating with pain. He shook a fist. "Send down a warrior who is no coward! I will not turn and run home! I have come to fight a fair fight! Send a man who will fight for the right to his cave! Him I will surely kill!"

More silence. A wave of heat passed over the land, receded.

"Oh, surely," mocked Sim, hands on naked hips, head back, mouth wide, "surely there's one among you not afraid to fight a cripple!" Silence. "No?" Silence.

"Then I have miscalculated you. I'm wrong. I'll stand here, then, until the sun shucks the flesh off my bone in black scraps, and call you the filthy names you deserve."

He got an answer.

"I do not like being called names," replied a man's voice.

Sim leaned forward, forgetting his crippled foot.

A huge man appeared in a cave mouth on the third level.

"Come down," urged Sim. "Come down, fat one, and kill me."

The man scowled seriously at his opponent a moment, then lumbered slowly down the path, his hands empty of any weapons. Immediately every cave above clustered with heads. An audience for this drama.

The man approached Sim. "We will fight by the rules, if you know them."

"I'll learn as we go," replied Sim.

This pleased the man and he looked at Sim warily, but not unkindly. "This much I will tell you," offered the man generously. "If you die, I will give your mate shelter and she will live as she pleases, because she is the wife of a good man."

Sim nodded swiftly. "I am ready," he said.

"The rules are simple. We do not touch each other, save with stones. The stones and the sun will do either of us in. Now is the time—"

A TIP of the sun showed on the horizon. "My name is Nhoj," said Sim's enemy, casually fingering up a handful of pebbles and stones, weighing them. Sim did likewise. He was hungry. He had not eaten for many minutes. Hunger was the curse of this planet's peoples—a perpetual demanding of empty stomachs for more, more food. His blood flushed weakly, shot tinglingly through veins in jolting throbs of heat and pressure, his ribcase shoved out, went in, shoved out again, impatiently.

"Now!" roared the three hundred watchers from the cliffs. "Now!" they clamored, the men and women and children balanced, in turmoil on the ledges. "Now! Begin!"

As if at a cue, the sun leaped high. It smote them a blow as with a flat, sizzling stone. The two men staggered under the molten impact, sweat broke from their naked thighs and loins, under their arms and on their faces was a glaze like fine glass.

Nhoj shifted his huge weight and looked at the sun as if in no hurry to fight. Then, silently, with no warning, he ka-nurcked out a pebble with a startling trigger-flick of thumb and forefinger. It caught Sim flat on the cheek, staggered him back, so that a rocket of unbearable pain climbed up his crippled foot and burst into nervous explosion at the pit of his stomach. He tasted blood from his bleeding cheek.

Nhoj moved serenely. Three more flickers of his magical hands and three tiny, seemingly harmless bits of stone flew like whistling birds. Each of them found a target, slammed it. The nerve centers of Sim's body! One hit his stomach so that ten hours' eating almost slid up his throat. A second got his forehead, a third his neck. He collapsed to the boiling sand. His knee made a wrenching sound on the hard earth. His face was colorless and his eyes, squeezed tight, were pushing tears out from the hot, quivering lids. But even as he had fallen he had let lose, with wild force, his handful of stones!

The stones purred in the air. One of them, and only one, struck Nhoj. Upon the left eyeball. Nhoj moaned and laid

his hands in the next instant to his shattered eye.

Sim choked out a bitter, sighing laugh. This much triumph he had. The eye of his opponent. It would give him . . . Time. Oh, gods, he thought, his stomach retching sickly, fighting for breath, this is a world of time. Give me a little more, just a trifle!

Nhoj, one-eyed, weaving with pain, pelted the writhing body of Sim, but his aim was off now, the stones flew to one side or if they struck at all they were weak and spent and lifeless.

Sim forced himself half erect. From the corners of his eyes he saw Lyte, waiting, staring at him, her lips breathing words of encouragement and hope. He was bathed in sweat, as if a rain spray had showered him down.

THE SUN was now fully over the horizon. You could smell it. Stones glinted like mirrors, the sand began to roil and bubble. Illusions sprang up everywhere in the valley. Instead of one warrior Nhoj he was confronted by a dozen, each in an upright position, preparing to launch another missile. A dozen irregular warriors who shimmered in the golden menace of day, like bronze gongs smitten, quivered in one vision!

Sim was breathing desperately. His nostrils flared and sucked and his mouth drank thirstily of flame instead of oxygen. His lungs took fire like silk torches and his body was consumed. The sweat spilled from his pores to be instantly evaporated. He felt himself shriveling, shriveling in on himself, he imagined himself looking like his father, old, sunken, slight, withered! Where was the sand? Could he move? Yes. The world wriggled under him, but now he was on his feet.

There would be no more fighting.

A murmur from the cliff told this. The sunburnt faces of the high audience gaped and jeered and shouted encouragement to their warrior. "Stand straight, Nhoj, save your strength now! Stand tall and perspire!" they urged him. And Nhoj stood, swaying lightly, swaying slowly, a pendulum in an incandescent fiery breath from the skyline. "Don't move, Nhoj, save your heart, save your power!"

"The Test, The Test!" said the people

on the heights. "The test of the sun."

And this was the worst part of the fight. Sim squinted painfully at the distorted illusion of cliff. He thought he saw his parents; father with his defeated face, his green eyes burning, mother with her hair blowing like a cloud of grey smoke in the fire wind. He must get up to them, live for and with them!

Behind him, Sim heard Lyte whimper softly. There was a whisper of flesh against sand. She had fallen. He did not dare turn. The strength of turning would bring him thundering down in pain and darkness.

His knees bent. If I fall, he thought, I'll lie here and become ashes. Where was Nhoj? Nhoj was there, a few yards from him, standing bent, slick with perspiration, looking as if he were being hit over the spine with great hammers of destruction.

"Fall, Nhoj! Fall!" screamed Sim, mentally. "Fall, fall! Fall and die so I can take your place!"

But Nhoj did not fall. One by one the pebbles in his half-loose left hand plummeted to the broiling sands and Nhoj's lips peeled back, the saliva burned away from his lips and his eyes glazed. But he did not fall. The will to live was strong in him. He hung as if by a wire.

Sim fell to one knee!

"Ahh!" wailed the knowing voices from the cliff. They were watching death. Sim jerked his head up, smiling mechanically, foolishly as if caught in the act of doing something silly. "No, no," he insisted drowsily, and got back up again. There was so much pain he was all one ringing numbness. A whirring, buzzing, frying sound filled the land. High up, an avalanche came down like a curtain on a drama, making no noise. Everything was quiet except for a steady humming. He saw fifty images of Nhoj now, dressed in armours of sweat, eyes puffed with torture, cheeks sunken, lips peeled back like the rind of a drying fruit. But the wire still held him.

"Now," muttered Sim, sluggishly, with a thick, baked tongue between his blazing teeth. "Now I'll fall and lie and dream." He said it with slow, thoughtful pleasure. He planned it. He knew how it must be done. He would do it accurately. He

lifted his head to see if the audience was watching.

They were gone!

The sun had driven them back in. All save one or two brave ones. Sim laughed drunkenly and watched the sweat gather on his dead hands, hesitate, drop off, plunge down toward sand and turn to steam half way there.

Nhoj fell.

The wire was cut. Nhoj fell flat upon his stomach, a gout of blood kicked from his mouth. His eyes rolled back into a white, senseless insanity.

Nhoj fell. So did his fifty duplicate illusions.

All across the valley the winds sang and moaned and Sim saw a blue lake with a blue river feeding it and low white houses near the river with people going and coming in the houses and among the tall green trees. Trees taller than seven men, beside the river mirage.

"Now," explained Sim to himself at last, "Now I can fall. Right—into—that—lake."

He fell forward.

He was shocked when he felt the hands eagerly stop him in mid-plunge, lift him, hurry him off, high in the hungry air, like a torch held and waved, ablaze.

"How strange is death," he thought, and blackness took him.

HE wakened to the flow of cool water on his cheeks.

He opened his eyes fearfully. Lyte held his head upon her lap, her fingers were moving food to his mouth. He was tremendously hungry and tired, but fear squeezed both of these things away. He struggled upward, seeing the strange cave contours overhead.

"What time is it?" he demanded.

"The same day as the contest. Be quiet," she said.

"The same day!"

She nodded amusedly. "You've lost nothing of your life. This is Nhoj's cave. We are inside the black cliff. We will live three extra days. Satisfied? Lie down."

"Nhoj is dead?" He fell back, panting, his heart slamming his ribs. He relaxed slowly. "I won. Gods, I won," he breathed.

"Nhoj is dead. So were we, almost. They carried us in from outside only in time."

He ate ravenously. "We have no time to waste. We must get strong. My leg—" He looked at it, tested it. There was a swathe of long yellow grasses around it and the ache had died away. Even as he watched the terrific pulsings of his body went to work and cured away the impurities under the bandages. It *has* to be strong by sunset, he thought. It *has* to be.

He got up and limped around the cave like a captured animal. He felt Lyte's eyes upon him. He could not meet her gaze. Finally, helplessly, he turned.

She interrupted him. "You want to go on to the ship?" she asked, softly. "Tonight? When the sun goes down?"

He took a breath, exhaled it. "Yes."

"You couldn't possibly wait until morning?"

"No."

"Then I'll go with you."

"No!"

"If I lag behind, let me. There's nothing here for me."

They stared at each other a long while. He shrugged wearily.

"All right," he said, at last. "I couldn't stop you, I know that. We'll go together."

## IX

THEY waited in the mouth of their new cave. The sun set. The stones cooled so that one could walk on them. It was almost time for the leaping out and the running toward the distant, glittering metal seed that lay on the far mountain.

Soon would come the rains. And Sim thought back over all the times he had watched the rains thicken into creeks, into rivers that cut new beds each night. One night there would be a river running north, the next a river running north-east, the third night a river running due west. The valley was continually cut and scarred by the torrents. Earthquakes and avalanches filled the old beds. New ones were the order of the day. It was this idea of the river and the directions of the river that he had turned over in his head for many hours. It might possibly— Well, he would wait and see.

He noticed how living in this new cliff

had slowed his pulse, slowed everything. A mineral result, protection against the solar radiations. Life was still swift, but not as swift as before.

"Now, Sim!" cried Lyte, testing the valley air.

They ran. Between the hot death and the cold one. Together, away from the cliffs, out toward the distant, beckoning ship.

Never had they run this way in their lives. The sound of their feet running was a hard, insistent clatter over vast oblongs of rock, down into ravines, up the sides, and on again. They raked the air in and out their lungs. Behind them the cliffs faded away into things they could never turn back to now.

They did not eat as they ran. They had eaten to the bursting point in the cave, to save time. Now it was only running, a lifting of legs, a balancing of bent elbows, a convulsion of muscles, a slaking in of air that had been fiery and was now cooling.

"Are they watching us?"

Lyte's breathless voice snatched at his ears, above the pound of his heart.

Who? But he knew the answer. The cliff peoples, of course. How long had it been since a race like this one? A thousand days? Ten thousand? How long since someone had taken the chance and sprinted with an entire civilization's eyes upon their backs, into gullies, across cooling plain. Were there lovers pausing in their laughter back there, gazing at the two tiny dots that were a man and woman running toward destiny? Were children eating of new fruits and stopping in their play to see the two people racing against time? Was Dienc still living, narrowing hairy eyebrows down over fading eyes, shouting them on in a feeble, rasping voice, shaking a twisted hand? Were there jeers? Were they being called fools, idiots? And in the midst of the name calling, were people praying them on, hoping they would reach the ship? Yes, under all the cynicism and pessimism, some of them, all of them, must be praying.

Sim took a quick glance at the sky, which was beginning to bruise with the coming night. Out of nowhere clouds materialized and a light shower trailed across a

gully two hundred yards ahead of them. Lightning beat upon distant mountains and there was a strong scent of ozone on the disturbed air.

"The halfway mark," panted Sim, and he saw Lyte's face half turn, longingly looking back at the life she was leaving. "Now's the time, if we want to turn back, we still have time. Another minute—"

**T**HUNDER snarled in the mountains. An avalanche started out small and ended up huge and monstrous in a deep fissure. Light rain dotted Lyte's smooth white skin. In a minute her hair was glistening and soggy with rain.

"Too late now," she shouted over the patting rhythm of her own naked feet. "We've got to go ahead!"

And it was too late. Sim knew, judging the distances, that there was no turning back now.

His leg began to pain him a little. He favored it, slowing. A wind came up swiftly. A cold wind that bit into the skin. But it came from the cliffs behind them, helped rather than hindered them. An omen? he wondered. No.

For as the minutes went by it grew upon him how poorly he had estimated the distance. Their time was dwindling out, but they were still an impossible distance from the ship. He said nothing, but the impotent anger at the slow muscles in his legs welled up into bitterly hot tears in his eyes.

He knew that Lyte was thinking the same as himself. But she flew along like a white bird, seeming hardly to touch ground. He heard her breath go out and in her throat, like a clean, sharp knife in its sheathe.

Half the sky was dark. The first stars were peering through lengths of black cloud. Lightning jiggled a path along a rim just ahead of them. A full thunderstorm of violent rain and exploding electricity fell upon them.

They slipped and skidded on moss-smooth pebbles. Lyte fell, scrambled up again with a burning oath. Her body was scarred and dirty. The rain washed over her.

The rain came down and cried on Sim. It filled his eyes and ran in rivers down his spine and he wanted to cry with it.

Lyte fell and did not rise, sucking her breath, her breasts quivering.

He picked her up and held her. "Run, Lyte, please, run!"

"Leave me, Sim. Go ahead!" The rain filled her mouth. There was water everywhere. "It's no use. Go on without me."

He stood there, cold and powerless, his thoughts sagging, the flame of hope blinking out. All the world was blackness, cold falling sheathes of water, and despair.

"We'll walk, then," he said. "And keep walking, and resting."

They walked for fifty yards, easily, slowly, like children out for a stroll. The gully ahead of them filled with water that went sliding away with a swift wet sound, toward the horizon.

Sim cried out. Tugging at Lyte he raced forward. "A new channel," he said, pointing. "Each day the rain cuts a new channel. Here, Lyte!" He leaned over the flood waters.

He dived in, taking her with him.

The flood swept them like bits of wood. They fought to stay upright, the water got into their mouths, their noses. The land swept by on both sides of them. Clutching Lyte's fingers with insane strength, Sim felt himself hurled end over end, saw flicks of lightning on high, and a new fierce hope was born in him. They could no longer run, well, then they would let the water do the running for them.

With a speed that dashed them against rocks, split open their shoulders, abraded their legs, the new, brief river carried them. "This way!" Sim shouted over a salvo of thunder and steered frantically toward the opposite side of the gully. The mountain where the ship lay was just ahead. They must not pass it by. They fought in the transporting liquid and were slammed against the far side. Sim leaped up, caught at an overhanging rock, locked Lyte in his legs, and drew himself hand over hand upward.

As quickly as it had come, the storm was gone. The lightning faded. The rain ceased. The clouds melted and fell away over the sky. The wind whispered into silence.

"The ship!" Lyte lay upon the ground. "The ship, Sim. This is the mountain of the ship!"

Now the cold came. The killing cold.

They forced themselves drunkenly up the mountain. The cold slid along their limbs, got into their arteries like a chemical and slowed them.

Ahead of them, with a fresh-washed sheen, lay the ship. It was a dream. Sim could not believe that they were actually so near it. Two hundred yards. One hundred and seventy yards. Gods, but it was cold.

The ground became covered with ice. They slipped and fell again and again. Behind them the river was frozen into a blue-white snake of cold solidity. A few last drops of rain from somewhere came down as hard pellets.

Sim fell against the bulk of the ship. He was actually touching it. Touching it! He heard Lyte whimpering in her constricted throat. This was the metal, the ship. How many others had touched it in the long days? He and Lyte had made it!

He touched it lovingly. Then, as cold as the air, his veins were chilled.

Where was the entrance?

You run, you swim, you almost drown, you curse, you sweat, you work, you reach a mountain, you go up it, you hammer on metal, you shout with relief, you reach the ship, and then—you can't find the entrance.

**H**E FOUGHT to keep himself from breaking down. Slowly, he told himself, but not too slowly, go around the ship. but not too slowly, go around the ship. The metal slid under his searching hands, so cold that his hands, sweating, almost froze to it. Now, far around to the side. Lyte moved with him. The cold held them like a fist. It began to squeeze.

The entrance.

Metal. Cold, immutable metal. A thin line of opening at the sealing point. Throwing all caution aside, he beat at it. He felt his stomach seething with cold. His fingers were numb, his eyes were half frozen in their sockets. He began to beat and search and scream against the metal door. "Open up! Open up!" He staggered.

The air-lock sighed. With a whispering of metal on rubber beddings, the door swung softly sidewise and vanished back. He saw Lyte run forward, clutch at her



throat, and drop inside a small shiny chamber. He shuffled after her, blankly.

The air-lock door sealed shut behind him.

He could not breathe. His heart began to slow, to stop.

They were trapped inside the ship now, and something was happening. He sank down to his knees and choked for air.

The ship he had come to for salvation was now slowing his pulse, darkening his brain, poisoning him. With a starved, faint kind of expiring terror, he realized that he was dying.

Blackness.

HE had a dim sense of time passing, of thinking, struggling, to make his heart go quick, quick. . . . To make his eyes focus. But the fluid in his body lagged quietly through his settling veins and he heard his temple pulses thud, pause, thud, pause and thud again with lulling intermissions.

He could not move, not a hand or leg or finger. It was an effort to lift the tonnage of his eyelashes. He could not shift his face even, to see Lyte lying beside him.

From a distance came her irregular breathing. It was like the sound a wounded bird makes with his dry, unraveled pinions. She was so close he could almost feel the heat of her; yet she seemed a long way removed.

I'm getting cold! he thought. Is this death? This slowing of blood, of my heart, this cooling of my body, this drowsy thinking of thoughts?

Staring at the ship's ceiling he traced its intricate system of tubes and machines. The knowledge, the purpose of the ship, its actions, seeped into him. He began to understand in a kind of revealing lassitude just what these things were his eyes rested upon. Slow. Slow.

There was an instrument with a gleaming white dial.

Its purpose?

He drudged away at the problem, like a man underwater.

People had used the dial. Touched it. People had repaired it. Installed it. People had dreamed of it before the building, before the installing, before the repairing and touching and using. The dial contained memory of use and manufacture, its

very shape was a dream-memory telling Sim why and for what it had been built. Given time, looking at anything, he could draw from it the knowledge he desired. Some dim part of him reached out, dissected the contents of things, analyzed them.

This dial measured time!

Millions of days of time!

But how could that be? Sim's eyes dilated, hot and glittering. Where were humans who needed such an instrument?

Blood thrummed and beat behind his eyes. He closed them.

Panic came to him. The day was passing. I am lying here, he thought, and my life slips away. I cannot move. My youth is passing. How long before I can move?

Through a kind of porthole he saw the night pass, the day come, the day pass, and again another night. Stars danced frostily.

I will lie here for four or five days, wrinkling and withering, he thought. This ship will not let me move. How much better if I had stayed in my home cliff, lived, enjoyed this short life. What good has it done to come here? I'm missing all the twilights and dawns. I'll never touch Lyte, though she's here at my side.

Delirium. His mind floated up. His thoughts whirled through the metal ship. He smelled the razor sharp smell of joined metal. He heard the hull contract with night, relax with day.

Dawn.

Already—another dawn!

Today I would have been mature. His jaw clenched. I must get up. I must move. I must enjoy my time of maturity.

But he didn't move. He felt his blood pump sleepily from chamber to red chamber in his heart, on down and around through his dead body, to be purified by his folding and unfolding lungs. Then the circuit once more.

The ship grew warm. From somewhere a machine clicked. Automatically the temperature cooled. A controlled gust of air flushed the room.

Night again. And then another day.

He lay and saw four days of his life pass.

He did not try to fight. It was no use. His life was over.

He didn't want to turn his head now. He didn't want to see Lyte with her face like his tortured mother's—eyelids like gray ash flakes, eyes like beaten, sanded metal, cheeks like eroded stones. He didn't want to see a throat like parched thongs of yellow grass, hands the pattern of smoke risen from a fire, breasts like desiccated rinds and hair stubbly and unshorn as moist gray weeds!

And himself? How did *he* look? Was his jaw sunken, the flesh of his eyes pitted, his brow lined and age-scarred?

**H**IS strength began to return. He felt his heart beating so slow that it was amazing. One hundred beats a minute. Impossible. He felt so cool, so thoughtful, so easy.

His head fell over to one side. He stared at Lyte. He shouted in surprise.

She was young and fair.

She was looking at him, too weak to say anything. Her eyes were like tiny silver medals, her throat curved like the arm of a child. Her hair was blue fire eating at her scalp, fed by the slender life of her body.

Four days had passed and still she was young . . . no, younger than when they had entered the ship. She was still adolescent.

He could not believe it.

Her first words were, "How long will this last?"

He replied, carefully. "I don't know."

"We are still young."

"The ship. Its metal is around us. It cuts away the sun and the things that came from the sun to age us."

Her eyes shifted thoughtfully. "Then, if we stay here—"

"We'll remain young."

"Six more days? Fourteen more? Twenty?"

"More than that, maybe."

She lay there, silently. After a long time she said, "Sim?"

"Yes."

"Let's stay here. Let's not go back. If we go back now, you know what'll happen to us. . . ?"

"I'm not certain."

"We'll start getting old again, won't we?"

He looked away. He stared at the ceil-

ing and the clock with the moving finger. "Yes. We'll grow old."

"What if we grow old—instantly. When we step from the ship won't the shock be too much?"

"Maybe."

Another silence. He began to move his limbs, testing them. He was very hungry. "The others are waiting," he said.

Her next words made him gasp. "The others are dead," she said. "Or will be in a few hours. All those we knew back there are old and worn."

He tried to picture them old. Dark, his sister, bent and senile with time. He shook his head, wiping the picture away. "They may die," he said. "But there are others who've been born."

"People we don't even know," said Lyte, flatly.

"But, nevertheless, *our* people," he replied. "People who'll live only eight days, or eleven days unless we help them."

"But we're *young*, Sim! We're young! We can *stay* young!"

He didn't want to listen. It was too tempting a thing to listen to. To stay here. To live. "We've already had more time than the others," he said. "I need workers. Men to heal this ship. We'll get on our feet now, you and I, and find food, eat, and see if the ship is movable. I'm afraid to try to move it myself. It's so big. I'll need help."

"But that means running back all that distance!"

"I know." He lifted himself weakly. "But I'll do it."

"How will you get the men back here?"

"We'll use the river."

"If it's there. It *may* be somewhere else."

"We'll wait until there *is* one, then. I've got to go back, Lyte. The son of Dienc is waiting for me, my sister, your brother, are old people, ready to die, and waiting for some word from us—"

After a long while he heard her move, dragging herself tiredly to him. She put her head upon his chest, her eyes closed, stroking his arm. "I'm sorry. Forgive me. You have to go back. I'm a selfish fool."

He touched her cheek, clumsily. "You're human. I understand you. There's nothing to forgive."

THEY found food. They walked through the ship. It was empty. Only in the control room did they find the remains of a man who must have been the chief pilot. The others had evidently bailed out into space in emergency life-boats. This pilot, sitting at his controls, alone, had landed the ship on a mountain within sight of other fallen and smashed crafts. Its location on high ground had saved it from the floods. The pilot himself had died, probably of heart failure, soon after landing. The ship had remained here, almost within reach of the other survivors, perfect as an egg, but silent, for—how many thousand days? If the pilot had lived, what a different thing life might have been for the ancestors of Sim and Lyte. Sim, thinking of this—felt the distant, ominous vibration of war. How had the war between worlds come out? Who had won? Or had both planets lost and never bothered trying to pick up survivors? Who had been right? Who was the enemy? Were Sim's people of the guilty or innocent side? They might never know.

He checked the ship hurriedly. He knew nothing of its workings, yet as he walked its corridors, patted its machines, he learned from it. It needed only a crew. One man couldn't possibly set the whole thing running again. He laid his hand upon one round, snout-like machine. He jerked his hand away, as if burnt.

"Lyte!"

"What is it?"

He touched the machine again, caressed it, his hand trembled violently, his eyes welled with tears, his mouth opened and closed, he looked at the machine, loving it, then looked at Lyte.

"With this machine—" he stammered, softly, incredulously. "With—with this machine I can—"

"What, Sim?"

He inserted his hand into a cup-like contraption with a lever inside. Out of port-hole in front of him he could see the distant line of cliffs. "We were afraid there might never be another river running by this mountain, weren't we?" he asked, exultantly.

"Yes, Sim, but—"

"There *will* be a river. And I *will* come back, tonight! And I'll bring men

with me. Five hundred men! Because with this machine I can blast a river bottom all the way to the cliffs, down which the waters will rush, giving myself and the men a swift, sure way of traveling back!" He rubbed the machine's barrel-like body. "When I touched it, the life and method of it shot into me! Watch!" He depressed the lever.

A beam of incandescent fire lanced out from the ship, screaming.

Steadily, accurately, Sim began to cut away a river bed for the storm waters to flow in. The night was turned to day by its hungry eating.

THE return to the cliffs was to be carried out by Sim alone. Lyte was to remain in the ship, in case of any mishap. The trip back seemed, at first glance, to be impossible. There would be no river rushing to cut his time, to sweep him along toward his destination. He would have to run the entire distance in the dawn, and the sun would get him, catch him before he'd reached safety.

"The only way to do it is to start *before* sunrise."

"But you'd be frozen, Sim."

"Here." He made adjustments on the machine that had just finished cutting the river bed in the rock floor of the valley. He lifted the smooth snout of the gun, pressed the lever, left it down. A gout of fire shot toward the cliffs. He fingered the range control, focused the flame end three miles from its source. Done. He turned to Lyte. "But I don't understand," she said.

He opened the air-lock door. "It's bitter cold out, and half an hour yet till dawn. If I run parallel to the flame from the machine, close enough to it, there'll not be much heat but enough to sustain life, anyway."

"It doesn't sound safe," Lyte protested.

"*Nothing* does, on this world." He moved forward. "I'll have a half hour start. That should be enough to reach the cliffs."

"But if the machine should fail while you're still running near its beam?"

"Let's not think of that," he said.

A moment later he was outside. He staggered as if kicked in the stomach. His heart almost exploded in him. The

environment of his world forced him into swift living again. He felt his pulse rise, kicking through his veins.

The night was cold as death. The heat ray from the ship sliced across the valley, humming, solid and warm. He moved next to it, very close. One misstep in his running and—

"I'll be back" he called to Lyte.

He and the ray of light went together.

**I**N the early morning the peoples in the caves saw the long finger of orange incandescence and the weird whitish apparition floating, running along beside it. There was muttering and superstition.

So when Sim finally reached the cliffs of his childhood he saw alien peoples swarming there. There were no familiar faces. Then he realized how foolish it was to expect familiar faces. One of the older men glared down at him. "Who're you?" he shouted. "Are you from the enemy cliff? What's your name?"

"I am Sim, the son of Sim!"

"Sim!"

An old woman shrieked from the cliff above him. She came hobbling down the stone pathway. "Sim, Sim, it is you!"

He looked at her, frankly bewildered. "But I don't know you," he murmured.

"Sim, don't you recognize me? Oh, Sim, it's me! Dark!"

"Dark!"

He felt sick at his stomach. She fell into his arms. This old, trembling woman with the half-blind eyes, his sister.

Another face appeared above. That of an old man. A cruel, bitter face. It looked down at Sim and snarled. "Drive him away!" cried the old man. "He comes from the cliff of the enemy. He's lived there! He's still young! Those who go there can never come back among us. Disloyal beast!" And a rock hurtled down.

Sim leaped aside, pulling the old woman with him.

A roar came from the people. They ran toward Sim, shaking their fists. "Kill him, kill him!" raved the old man, and Sim did not know who he was.

"Stop!" Sim held out his hands. "I come from the ship!"

"The ship?" The people slowed. Dark

clung to him, looking up into his young face, puzzling over its smoothness.

"Kill him, kill him, kill him!" croaked the old man, and picked up another rock.

"I offer you ten days, twenty days, thirty more days of life!"

The people stopped. Their mouths hung open. Their eyes were incredulous.

"Thirty days?" It was repeated again and again. "How?"

"Come back to the ship with me. Inside it, one can live forever!"

The old man lifted high a rock, then, choking, fell forward in an apoplectic fit, and tumbled down the rocks to lie at Sim's feet.

Sim bent to peer at the ancient one, at the bleary, dead eyes, the loose, sneering lips, the crumpled, quiet body.

"Chion!"

"Yes," said Dark behind him, in a croaking, strange voice. "Your enemy. Chion."

**T**HAT night a thousand warriors started for the ship as if going to war. The water ran in the new channel. Five hundred of them were drowned or lost behind in the cold. The others, with Sim, got through to the ship.

Lyte awaited them, and threw wide the metal door.

The weeks passed. Generations lived and died in the cliffs, while the five hundred workers labored over the ship, learning its functions and its parts.

On the last day they disbanded. Each ran to his station. Now there was a destiny of travel who still remained behind.

Sim touched the control plates under his fingers.

Lyte, rubbing her eyes, came and sat on the floor next to him, resting her head against his knee, drowsily. "I had a dream," she said, looking off at something far away. "I dreamed I lived in caves in a cliff on a cold-hot planet where people grew old and died in eight days and were burnt."

"What an impossible dream," said Sim. "People couldn't possibly live in such a nightmare. Forget it. You're awake now."

He touched the plates gently. The ship rose and moved into space. Sim was right. The nightmare was over at last.



# THE VIZIGRAPH

There is no way we can think of to soften the blow. Chester Whitehorn is gone. One minute there he was in his chair. The next—well . . .

Of course, we'd all noticed the things he'd been doing to his typewriter—watching him furtively as he hooked wires into it, installed a condenser, a vario-grid, some second-hand audio tubes and an indescribable gadget he called (but we couldn't have heard him right) a psychometric transubstantiator.

There was no noise, no flash of light, no fuss—and no C.W. Is this what happens to all PLANET editors?

So they gave *me* the mag. Naturally, I was a bit nervous. Then I stumbled over the Vizigraph. Immediately I ceased being nervous and became instead a huddled, white-faced thing with large, haunting eyes brimming with tears, and an uncontrolled palsy.

It seems incredible that I am to pretend to preside over this gathering of wits and technical minds—I, whose sole knowledge of scientific facts is limited to a dog-like faith in something called the Law of Gravity (I always look behind me for the chair before I sit down—the scientific method, you know)!

However, if such is my lot, let me stiffen my undulating spine and get on with it. There are three fairly important matters to bring up—and then you guys can start scratching one another with those long finger-nails I just *know* you've been cultivating.

The word on the paper is that, the situation being what it is, we can't tell from one issue to the next what P. S. will be printed on. (No, Junior, it's not wide enough.)

That covers frequency of issue also. Until you grumblers get out in the woods with those double-bitted axes and knock us over a couple more trees, P. S. is gonna be a quarterly, see? Great Ghu, you don't expect *us* to chop wood, do you?

Finally, to repeat the rules, have your letter typewritten, double-spaced, on one side of the paper. Oh, it doesn't have to be typewritten? Okay, then—who's gonna buy me an electron microscope? Remember, the average linotype operator is not necessarily a STFAN!

I almost forgot—the pic winners. They should send a card naming their choice of originals from the Summer issue. No. 1 can have one choice, but No. 2 had better name two and No. 3 three, in order of preference. Here they are:

1: Chad Oliver. 2: Gerry Williams. 3: Rick Sneyary.  
Hello, everybody!

P. L. P.

## HERE'S WALTON!

4108 Marathon Street  
Hollywood, California

DEAR EDITOR:

Thanks for the plug in P.S.'s Feature Flash, but primarily sincere congratulations on the new Summer edition of you know what. An extraordinary sea change into something marvelous and

strange. A mutation in the publishing field is an unexpected result of atomic radiation. PLANET has emerged as MAGO-SUPERIOR with slick paper allowing for some real artistic expression for pulp-frustrated artists. PLANET was always unique, not enslaved by strict policy, but I don't remember it ever having attained nearly the height of Summer, 1946. Illustrating very fine, especially Moore and Murphy, and the red misty surrealistic madness of the Brackett-Bradbury amalgam was ably diagnosed by Martin's cover illustration.

I don't criticize things very much to others, so I probably would never be an acceptable Vizigrapher. Things I like, others don't, and vice versa. But all the stories in the Summer PLANET seemed exceptional, including a philosophical gem entitled *Prisoner of the Brain-Princess*. I don't feel inclined to rate stories because everyone rates them a little differently anyway, and what is gained? For example, why invite wrath by putting Bradbury's *Million Year Picnic* above *Lorelei of the Red Mist*?—which my miasmic brain actually did. Why? Because I have a weakness for very short, very powerful atmosphere, mood stories, and prefer a number of these rather than one or two lengthy epics. But that's just me, and I don't think these things matter very much.

However, for the sake of discussion, there are general themes used repeatedly in STF that strike me very illogically and make me uncomfortable sometimes. Such as:

1. FUTURE INTERPLANETARY WARS —It's an accepted idea now that atomic power automatically means—no more wars. Except one more. The last one. Nothing can cancel out the ultimate destructive magnitude of atomic power. Not even the force fields visualized by Lensman, E. E. SMITH.

2. SPACE PIRATES —Scientific progress in physics, technocracy, has forged so far ahead of social "science" (?) now that man is in imminent danger of destroying himself by inability to control the power he has developed. Now that we have clutched onto atomic power, the atomic-bomb, isn't it logical to assume that in the future man will have either developed a sane, rational social consciousness or will have annihilated himself? If this is logical, then why a super-atomic-navigated universe crawling with a lot of anti-social space pirates?

3. PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY —In most STF people talk, act, love, feel, and generally behave in the far super-future as they do now. It is true that social norms, ethical, moral, and judicial codes haven't changed noticeably since the Neanderthals, but it can't logically be assumed that a similar static situation will prevail for the next—well—even the next fifty years, or even one year, let alone a million. Why? Unless there is a tremendous revolution in people's psychology and modes of thinking and living together—sociology—there won't be any future. At least one of super-science. When a man gets in a big shiny new sixteen-cylinder car, drunk, and hurtles down the wide wonderful avenue and kills himself, along with several others—that illustrates the thing.

4. THEMES OF ONE-MAN DICTATORS OF SOLAR SYSTEM —It's been obvious for a while that a one-man dictatorship is not only unfeasible now, but has been for some time. Populations are a little too big now for strong-arm chiefs. Governmental or State dictatorships

are remotely imaginable over the billions upon billions who would inhabit the future Solar System. But one lone villainous black-hearted swine achieving this—even long enough to create a story in which a hero can destroy him—well, who knows?

5. IN FACT, ALL THEMES OF THE FUTURE WITH BOTH SUPER-SCIENCE AND DARK AGE SOCIAL THINKING, SOMEHOW COMBINED. Unless, of course, it can be made logical, somehow.

There. A few cautious gripes. But not very vitriolic. A good yarn's good and if it's good in spite of being obviously completely illogical, all the better. That's why I like STF and fantasy, and sometimes write a reasonable facsimile thereof.

As for "off-trail" stories, ah, there I can wax feverish! I howl as do innumerable others, for off-trail yarns. And as soon as some editor, trembling, pallid with unholy fear, takes a chance on one, a few always raise all hell! And we get more formulae. They weep tears all over the Vizigraph because of an "unhappy" ending. Why did you have the hero disappear in the middle of the story and never come back anymore? Why wasn't a woman in the story? Or a man either? Why only monsters?

But, even at that, it seems that STF and fantasy is about the most undogmatic, free, dynamic and forward-looking "literature" you can find. I don't know what I would do in this mundane, colorless world of atomic war, murder, lust, madness and nightmare, without it!

Sincerely,

BRYCE WALTON.

## QUOTE—UNQUOTE

400 Ontario St.  
Wheeling, W. Va.

DEAR EDITOR:

Something amazing has come to be seen in Summer PLANET. Besides the fact that the cover is somewhat swell, we have a man among us who has opened his mouth and put, not one, but both feet into it, clear up to his neck. You know who I mean, that guy who sounds as if he got up on the wrong side of his gopher hole the morning of his writing, the "Describin' Kid." It seems that his description of a letter wrote by a bumble-brained, blubbering bunny-nose of a moron fits his own perfectly. To top it all off, he's right in there with the rest of us morons.

Judge me knot, Sir, if I convert to a fermal listing of the stories. In me humbug opinyvern, *Lilly-eyes of the Red Mist*, is fine, swell and etcedric. However, in casting me glims on that putred thing at the end of it, I was heard to say, in a nasty tone of verce, quote—Eeeewwww—unquote. A purefact describe of me sentrements. *Parishoner of the Brain-mysteries* was nextly. Panting hard on its heels comes *The Millionaire's Picknic*. Then *The Shadder Gobs*. The udders git me apprecelation. The insides illustriousations is almost masterpeaches. Before sayin' nothin' about the brain bustin' boys in the Vizigripe, I gotta take me magic portion —to wit, "Gulp, cawff, gah!"—un-to wit.

It seems to me that the discussion on velocity has reached a point where further argument will prove only boring. While Mr. Sherlock's views are not precisely my own, I find that I have taken a liking to him because he has expressed doubt in his own beliefs. And, of wise men and fools, only the wise may see his own ignorance. There-



fore, I would like to ask him, and any others who have traveled in thought to the end of space and the beginning and end of time, and wondered what is beyond, to consider the following:

In the beginning, man was little more than a dumb animal with no mathematics, no science and no theory. All that we have today was given us by them and those who came after them, and the world was set in their hearts as it is in ours. In other words, they knew nothing of an element called ether. If there is such an element, it influences all things, and strictly material concepts probably are faulty for lack of it. If we wish to fully understand the actions of light and such, it seems logical to say that we must first understand the medium through which it travels. So, I propose a hot time in the old Vizigraph to the tune of "ether—pro and con."

Since I have devoted about ten years of my "spare time" life to the forming of a theory concerning this medium, which will soon (I hope) see publication, I will start the ball rolling.

There are many indications of such an element. Wave propagation, gravity and momentum have no understandable reason without it. It has no chemical formula because it is the only true solid. Only a few conditions of this element are responsible for all things. Without it, there could be nothing.

O. K., boys, chew my ear off! I'll love it!

Yours,

BILL (Jerkie & Hyde-e-ho) OBERFIELD.

## OKAY, WE BLUSH!

1328 North Market  
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just finished the latest issue of *PLANET* and I was ashamed to see that story *Lorelei of the Red Mist* by Leigh Brackett and Ray Bradbury. I do not consider that a story of that type has any place in a science-fiction magazine. Ever since there was a science-fiction magazine the stories have been classed as the highest type of imaginative literature, designed to make people think and develop their minds. I could not see anything like that in the story as written. In fact, the mental impression I got was of the two authors deliberately setting out to see how foul a story they could write and still get it printed.

Please remember that it is the younger people who will become the new readers of the magazine, and do you believe that any parents that have the welfare of their children at heart will encourage them to read stories of that type? It took me a pint of Listerine to wash the dirty taste out of my mouth. In fact, I feel like suggesting that Brackett and Bradbury have their skulls trepanned so a vacuum cleaner could be applied to their minds. The reason that I am withholding final judgment is because of the other story by Bradbury, *The Million Year Picnic*. That was really good.

I would suggest that Bradbury stick to writing stories of the latter type and leave the filth alone. The same goes for Leigh Brackett. How about it, Mr. Bradbury and Miss Brackett?

As for the other stories, they were better by far. *Pumpkin Eater* and *Space-Lane of No-Return* were both ingenious. More like them, please. One thing that I don't understand is the supposedly great danger in passing through the Asteroid Belt. Taking it as a rough circle

700,000,000 miles across makes it figures out to about 1,000,000 miles between each planetoid. I can't see any danger in that big a gap.

*Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress* certainly presents a paradox. The idea would be enough to drive anybody wacky. Working to build up a civilization that you already destroyed a million years in the future. No wonder he was slightly woozy at times. I enjoyed *The Shadow Gods*. Any story in which they are forced to use an old-fashioned firearm always amuses me. So many writers go overboard on super-duper weapons and then sneer at modern weapons as being clumsy and old fashioned. They forget that a modern Colt, for instance, is of such fine workmanship that it would still be good two hundred years from now and would always have some use. Especially on the frontier where repair shops are non-existent, as you never could build a ray gun that would have the durability of a Colt.

Sincerely yours,

EDWIN SIGLER.

P.S. Rocklyme sure turned out a screwy story, but you never can prove him wrong.

## SNEARY HAS A RIVAL

Seventh and Lincolnway  
Nevada, Iowa

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just started the summer mag. of *PLANET STORIES* and after thumbing through and finding not too much I read the first story, which was good (but thats all) the picture at the first of the story is allright but after making a good start on the upper half you dropped the other like a hot spud.

This Sigler dose not care for money if he wants to pay for a as he putes it . . . . . and your book too he plays penney any with silver dollars. Why not get dubbel your money for twenty cents. I won't say your stories are dull because I skip a paragraph when it ges that way. I was also looking at some of your pictures and they had metal cloths on at such an angel that with out hinges she would have some trubel gitting off.

Sincerely yours,

JACK SMALLDRIDGE.

(The dots above are Mr. Smalldridge's and not mine!—Ed.)

## ACCORDING TO OLIVER

1311-25th Street  
Galveston, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

The mad genius idly thumbed through the thin, slick pages of the Fall, 1946, issue of *PLANET STORIES*. Ignoring several fascinating items in the fictional realm—including the current Emmett McDowell opus, *The Jade Jerk of Jupiter*—he arrived at last at *The Vizigraph*. His gleaming little eyes scanned the department closely. He shook his weary head in dismay; three pages gone and still . . . but it was there!

"Aha!" exclaimed the mad genius. "Aha, aha, aha!" (At this point he was sued by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. From beyond the grave, of course.) "A letter from Oliver! What *The Vizigraph* needs is some really clever writing, and who can fill the bill better than Oliver?" (Off-hand, you can probably think of several thousand people; but I persevere.)

The mad genius smiled as he read Oliver's

remarks on the Summer P. S. (He was quite mad, you see.) "Heh!" gasped the genius. "Oliver says here that he tried to get through Whittington's *Space-Lane of No-Return*, but that the meteorites were too much for him—something was, anyway. He hopes Mr. Whittington will either improve or take his own cue. No Return! Heh—that's rich!"

The mad genius idly fashioned an atomic bomb from an old umbrella. "Hmph," he observed with rare linguistic ability. "He says that Ray Bradbury's *The Million Year Picnic* was the best story in the issue—twice in a row for Ray. Says that he is without a doubt stfantasy's fair-haired boy. And Lorelei of the *Red Mist*, co-authored by Bradbury and Leigh Brackett, was next best, according to Oliver. The lad must be a genius like myself—I, too, liked those stories. Hmf. Says you can always tell a Bracketale. They all go something like this:

*"Big Joe Blow calmly ran his ham-like hands through the four-foot growth of black hair on his chest. Blood was pouring from his mighty shoulder, so he scooped up some muck and plastered it to the wound. He looked steadily at Queen Splot. She looked at him through amber eyes. Her long, silken hair sheathed her perfect body like a cigar-wrapper. Sombro, the harp-player, touched his instrument—briefly. A poignant sound filled the vault. Twang-g-g-g-g!"*

"Hah! Says that *Captives of the Weir-Wind* was finely done, too, though Rocklynnne has done better."

The face of the mad genius suddenly became contorted with pain. Horrible agony. "Heh!" he cried. "What's this? Oliver says that the artwork has very definitely improved! The traitor! He's supposed to pan all the artists! Hah—he even says that Martin, on the cover, though not fully exploited this time, has a distinctive style that might easily grow into a P. S. trademark! And he says that the interior pic by Moore was . . . can't quite make this out . . . wonder what *huba - huba - huba* means?"

The mad genius mentally transfixed a fly on the opposite wall, killing it instantly. (His initials are D,D, and T. Joke.) "Hmf. Oliver notes that *The Pumpkin Eater*, by Carlton Smith, was too good to get by without a word of praise. And he says that the best letters in *La Vizi* were by Anger, Williams, and Jewett. He's merely being modest, of course, because it's perfectly obvious that his own was far superior."

The mad genius glanced at his watch (99&44/100% pure) and stole away into the night on some unknown mission. No doubt. To everyone's profound elation, your humble correspondent does likewise.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER.

## A MODEL HE WANTS!

215 E. Southern Ave.  
Covington, Kentucky

DEAR EDITOR:

Robert Melville's heartening comment encourages me to disregard Phil Warner's warning and again voice my erudite opinion upon the subject of accelerated velocities.

Sigler and Sherlock both stress the importance of the Doppler Effect. For the benefit of

less scientific readers I would like to explain that the Doppler Effect is nothing more than a stepped-up version of the apparent increase in the frequency of an approaching sound wave, such as the whistle of a locomotive or the horn of an automobile. The general effect is something like that gosh-awful wail which emerges from the business end of a slide-trombone.

Both gentlemen seem to forget that the theory presupposes a stationary medium. If the medium is in motion, then the pattern of reception is altered accordingly. Like when the wind blows and either adds or subtracts its speed from the velocity of the wave-train being measured.

The contraction theory of Lorentz-Fitzgerald was hypothetical rather than experimental, being accepted as the only logical explanation for the negative results obtained from the Michelson-Morley Experiment. And that classic experiment, conducted in 1881, within the Earth's atmospheric envelope, was expected to reveal the attributes of outer space! The Doppler Effect assumes that the negative results proved the vacuity of space and its consequent inability to move.

Now let's consider another angle of the problem. In the one second that it takes a ray of light to travel 186,000 miles toward an objective, a divergent ray which starts at the same time may strike anywhere within a circle measuring somewhat more than 1,200 miles in diameter without traveling more than one mile farther than its companion ray. Since the difference in time is only 1/186000ths of a second, distance upon the surface of the Earth becomes unimportant, and the only accurate measurement left us is the angle of refraction or reflection.

As to Einstein's curved space and twisted time, well, I've accumulated quite a bit of data which proves that the Pythagorean equation for finding the hypotenuse of a triangle is coincidental rather than incidental. There are several awkwardly unproportional angles evolved through Trigonometric functions wherein the hypotenuse follows a quantum arrangement in preference to uniform acceleration. (Ooft—En.) Altogether, I would say that a considerable portion of our modern science is based upon a misapplication of the square-root formulae.

Two pages are not enough for a comprehensible presentation of the proof for that statement. However, anyone who fancies himself as a mathematician is invited to write for a more detailed version. The situation is something like that in *Captives Of The Weir-Wind* by Ross Rocklynnne. We need an equation that accelerates to the equator and then decelerates to the other pole—minus the broken rail!

How many mathematical errors have accumulated during the 2,500 years since Pythagoras misinterpreted the meaning of a square and its root?

Sincerely,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY.

P.S. I seem to have used the Winter issue for kindling a fire during one of the cold waves, so looks like my pleasure in taking third place will have to go unrewarded.

How about sending me one of the models—and let the artist keep the pic?

Or, if that request is vetoed—any pic with a beautiful red-head as the center of attraction will suffice.

R. A. BRADLEY.

FROM 670 FIFTH . . .

670 George St.  
Clyde, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

Well! Well! Summer ish PLANET STORIES. SUMMER? \*#/@%! Still a quarterly! Don't you know there's a war over? Oh well, editors have short memories.

Hmm. New cover (or should I say "un-cover") artist. Anyway, I don't like him. (There, there, Ed. Don't blubber. You'll hit the jack-pot one of these days.)

Whadayaknow? Novel by Brackett and Bradbury! Should be good. Now I'll look at the pictures, now the Vizigraph. Still only ten pages. Looky! A letter from Ohio. Clyde, too! That's where I live! George Street? I live on George St., too! 670? That's my house! THAT'S MY LETTER! I drop thru the floor.

Comfortably esconced in the coal bin, I read my brain child. It's all there. Right between the Hermit and the Last Monster. Now I can die, happy in the knowledge that my words will be forever treasured in the hearts of my fellowmen—and their S-F mags. (What brought that on?)

To continue. My typewriter has plain ole Pica type. Then, lo and behold! In my letter it turns out Italic! That's better than the atom bomb!

*Lorelei of the Red Mist* is first. Brackett's back and Bradbury's got her! Ver-ry good fantasy. You better get a couple more of their collaberrations. (Put down that dictionary, it's clean.) We want more Brackettales! *Captives of the Weir-wind* is next. Darn good plot, it kept me guessing all the way thru. That screw-like rotation of the planet was clever. Rocklynnne always was a good writer. *The Shadow-gods* by Vaseline—pardon, Vaseleos Garson was good. Next was *Space-lane of No-return*. Fifth, was *The Million Year Picnic*. Gave me something to think about. Next was *Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress*. A good plot but the writing just didn't agree with me. Or vice versa. Your "Fiction House" must have had a leaky roof to let *The Pumpkin Eater* in. From the title, I expected Shule to make a few pumpkin pies. I love pumpkin pies.

Using the Racetrack System, Win, Place, and Show, I push aside the drapes and enter the wrathful confines of the Vizigraph. The Drapes of Wrath! Haw haw! Get it? Put down your blue pencil, Ed. I'm getting the lead out tonite!

Now if you've recovered, Rick Sneary wins with his suggestion for a super-correspondence club and Viz-supplement. Membership open only to those who can write. That means you, Oberfield.

In Place position is R. Anger. Take his suggestions seriously. Fr'instance, the story titles. Blank of the Blank-blank. Blank of the blank-blank. Blank of Blank. Blank of the blank-blank. What the blankety-blank is this? Does the titler get paid by the word?

Gerry Williams Shows. Why, I dunno. Maybe to promote international relations.

Warner seems to be mad at somebody. Mean-thinks he is soon going to receive a deluge of threatening letters. AND MY SHOULDERS ARE NOT ROUND!

Sherlock and Sigler ought to get together. Say, cocked typewriters at twenty paces.

M. Hatfield's hats are off, he says. How many heads you got, anyway?

H'ray! Leydenfrost is back. Both very good. Kiemle, p. 107, very good. Rube Moore, pp. 2-3, wouldn't be Rubimore, is it? Dame's good. Doolin fair. Martin, p. 61, exceptional. (That means very, very good.) P. 55 also good. Murphy's gal is good, also city on p. 90. Anderson's spot pics are good, too. We're all glad you have more illustrations for each story, ain't we, gang? I didn't care for Martin's painting. Maybe you can get a Leydenfrost, eh?

Gotta go now. Brush-man's coming. Gotta make him read my letter.

Sincerely,

TOM JEWETT.

## TO HEAR IS TO OBEY

520 Highland Ave.  
Ottawa, Ontario

DEAR EDITOR:

Thanks for printing my letter in the Viz. I'd also like to say that I was sincere in all my criticism. And I would also like to say that most of the things I suggested have been done. This is not, of course, because I suggested them but because a lot of "I's"—the average fans have suggested them. And the fact that you, as editor, have granted the fans' wishes to such an extent shows that you are really tops.

I said at the beginning of my last letter that PLANET was the fourth stf mag in my line-up. Well, just for the records, I'd like to say that it is now third and only held down to that position because of its quarterly status, which limits the number of good yarns we get from it in comparison with other mags, all but two of which are now on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. In any comparison of single issues, PLANET would equal any stf mag, past or present.

Without seeming to dwell on that letter, I think it is only fair to review my suggestions and criticisms and show how they have been answered. After all, when an editor makes such a determined effort to please the fans, he deserves all the praise in the world.

My first suggestion dealt with bringing up the story standard still higher and I mentioned that I thought some Brackett would do the trick. Well! We've got our Brackett, fellas! Her story stood out like Venus on a clear night.

The second criticism was of the covers. Well, I'm still not sure if that one has been satisfied or not. Parkhurst was an excellent artist, but seemed incapable of producing an accurate cover and so spoiled his entire effect. It is just possible that it was not his fault and if that is so then it is you, not Parkhurst, who is to blame. I asked in my last letter whether or not those monotonous covers, all featuring a semi-nude woman were dictated by Editorial Policy or whether the artist was to blame. I received no answer to that one. I'm still curious. (When people stop buying P. S., that's the time to start fooling with the cover.—Ed.)

As to the Summer cover and Chester Martin's brush work. I'm not going to be too quick to criticize. This cover is one of the most completely accurate and well laid out that I have ever seen. The art-work is consistently great with the exception of the bodies of Hugh Starke and Beudag. Starke's chunky body of

the cover was quite different from the impression received while reading the story and Beudag was certainly not the beauty she was described as. Also, she was supposed to be wearing much less clothing than she was on the cover. If you were not prepared to have her illustrated as she was supposed to be dressed (and I would have criticized you if you had), then why didn't you have Martin do another scene?

I cannot leave the cover without stating that I thought that Starke's expression was one of the greatest character studies it has been my pleasure to see on the cover of a science-fiction mag. So, Mr. Whitehorn, I'm going to close this rather lengthy dissertation on the cover by saying: please keep Mr. Martin as cover artist, but do not force him to stick to the Eternal Triangle—Please!

The third criticism I made was of the interiors. That has been answered so completely that it staggers me. I have seldom seen such an array of really great interiors in any one mag., bar none! Moore was magnificent, Doolin was delightful, Leydenfrost was lovely, Martin was marvelous, Murphy was masterful, Anderson was awe-inspiring, but Kiemle was korny.

The Viz. was great with Gerry Williams running away with first place. *The Purple Prince of Pluto* (Chad Oliver) romped in second (One of the funniest things in the Viz. was your Ed. Note about Fox's head). Lonely Little Jewett copped third, even if he didn't like *The Diversifal*. By the way, Ed, what story did the Spring cover illustrate?

Squeezing in, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

R. R. ANGER.

## EGG IN YER BEER?

84 Baker Ave.  
Dover, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

The Summer PLANET hit the local stands, I bought it, scanned the contents page, and was very favorably impressed. Brackett . . . Rocklynne . . . Bradbury . . . the top names. The lead story, quite naturally, was the one that immediately captured the attention of this 'umble one. In the opinion of this reader, Leigh Brackett and Ray Bradbury happen to be just about the most readable of those writers grinding out science-fiction for the pulps today. And a collaboration of 'em was (to use that nauseating adjective) super. *Lorelei of the Red Mist* proved a neat job, all in all quite deftly handled. More of the same would be welcome.

The style of your new cover artist is intriguing. On first glance, this issue's cover gives the impression of being rather sketchy and indistinct, but on closer examination, the reds and greens—blurred just to the right degree—produce a nice effect. Interior artwork seems to be improving. What?—no Ringer Family?

The *Feature Flash* was interesting, as per usual. Would like to see Whitehorn's biography therein. Got any skeletons in the family closet?

On to *The Vixigraph*. The usual mixture of corn and comments, with an occasional grain of common sense popping up once in a while to break the monotony. Here's the vote on top letters:

(1) Rick Sneary. Give the man an original. Give him a lifetime subscription to PLANET. Give him some stock in the Love Romances Publishing Company. This letter was marvelous. Usually, I'm one of those queer characters who

thinks the editor should weed out all misspellings and grammatical errors in letters published, but this case is an exception. Sneary has a genius for knowing how to misspell a word in exactly the right place. And I especially enjoyed Rick's comment, "The part where the hero was tortured by the fears of his past was a very neet tuch. Nothing is so frightful as the fears of youth." Unquote.

(2) Gerry Williams. Yeah, I agree that PLANET is now featuring more yarns with a "radically new twist"—this is another step upward for the mag, methinks. Variety is the spice of life, and all that sort of rot.

(3) Chad Oliver. As for s-f being literature, I frankly fail to see what difference it makes. Let's have more good stories, with a dash of human interest, handled as convincingly as possible, with the emphasis upon entertainment and readability—and the "literature" angle will take care of itself.

Special nods for other good letters to Roy Tidwell, Clyde Thompson, Jr., Ken Bonnell, Lewis Sherlock, and a few more.

The letter signed Phil Warner is the sort of thing which comes along at very regular intervals. It's bound to arouse plenty of comment elsewhere. Seems that wringing the Vizifans through the wash is a sport that must be indulged in at least once or twice every year. If Mr. Warner's letter isn't a hoax, it's at least a bit redundant. It's also fortunate that scientific discussion and deep attempts at literary criticism don't predominate the Viz. We'd all be bored stiff. Whattaya want, Warner? Egg in yer beer?

Ha. I forgot to mention the new, slicker pulp paper used in this issue. Verr' nice. It almost gives the mag an air of distinction. No sarcastic comments, please.

Having rambled quite enough, will close with one parting shot: What if the gal in the pic on page 3 wore her hair shorter?

Cordially,

JOE KENNEDY.

## NO FEUD LIKE AN OLD FEUD

1450 East 19th St.  
Brooklyn 30, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

The novel by Brackett and Bradbury was a great piece of fantasy. It was very well written and Leigh Brackett (I assume it is her by past stories) injects a sexy aspect. I have always liked Brackett immensely. She has writtin some very good stuff for other mags, but on the whole she has given her best stuff for PLANET.

The pic on page two for the novel was very good, though it seems smudged looking. The girl's hair is conveniently long in the pic, 'eh wot? (They keep talking about that hair. What are they driving at?—Ed.)

What? Are you kidding? How did you get the nerve to print that cover? The guy is stunted looking and his chest looks wrinkled like he had on a celluloid shirt. Her skin is very white while he looks like an Indian. The gal is nicely shaped 'cept she's too flat chested. Oh, yes, green men on the bottom of the boat. I nearly missed them, unlucky me.

This ish, while good, was not as good as the last one. There is too much fantasy and not enough science in the stories. On the whole the pics were very good, excluding the cover.

Why are you so adverse to long novels? A good 60 or 70-page novel would really hit the spot with me as I prefer novels over short stories. You seem to turn out very good novelettes.

With a voluptuous grin I now turn to La Vizi. This is the first time I am daring to mention it. But, since most Vizifans do I will: Chad Oliver had a real nice letter. The Vizigraph is the best reading section in fandom. There are no advertisements to get in the way and it is long. Back some, when PLANET hit a slump the Viz. always seemed to make up for it. There were some good feuds back then and how about a nice "friendly" one? If I remember correctly, the others were rather bitter. 'Specially one with a Mr. Buchanon, I think.

The paper you use is thin and sort of slick looking. I hope it doesn't tear easily. Three months are too much to wait for PLANET. I'd like a bi-monthly mag.

Goomby all,  
HOWARD GABRIEL.

### (GROAN) ANOTHER SYSTEM!

134 Second Street  
Fort Myers, Fla.

DEAR EDITOR:

Stop! Don't read this letter; it's absolutely useless. Stop, I say, before it's too late!

Oh, well. I warned you. If you must read on, start with this Vizigraph review.

Roy Tidwell. Why write a "why" letter? (Joke.)

Clyde Thompson, Jr. Yer cookin' wit' hydro-gen, brother.

R. R. Anger. Seen this issue yet, bub?

Phil Warner. Shades of Buchanon! I wonder what kind of mentality it takes to write a letter like that.

Howard Gabriel. Oh, were you looking at the face?

Harley Sachs. Sic 'im, BEM's, sic 'im.

M. Hatfield. What? An artist read a story? Never! Never!

Bill Oberfield. This troye of letter is just too, too punny.

Lewis Sherlock. Oh, so you have a physics textbook, too.

Editor's comments. The more the better.

Where, oh, where are Milt Lesser and Joe K.? I have developed a system to rate stories, cover (is there a doctor in the house? Mr. Whitehorn just fainted), pics, and Vizigraph. You simply take the percentage of the issue's value which the particular section makes up. (You figure that out; I can't.) For instance, the Summer cover rates 3%, the Vizi about 7%, the interior illustrations way up at 12%. The stories shape up about like this:

|                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Lorelei of the Red Mist</i>        | 18% |
| <i>Captives of the Weir Wind</i>      | 15% |
| <i>The Million Year Picnic</i>        | 12% |
| <i>The Shadow-Gods</i>                | 10% |
| <i>Prisoner of the Brain-Mistress</i> | 10% |
| <i>Space Lane of No-Return</i>        | 8%  |
| <i>The Pumpkin Eater</i>              | 5%  |

PLANET gets better all the time. A new editor, better art work, and better paper are pretty good evidence of this. Keep Martin by all means. Bleep, bleep.

Very truly yours,

ROBERT MELVILLE, MM/1c.  
(Masterful Moron)

### TRY DOING IT FOUR TIMES

1724 Miss. St.  
Lawrence, Kan.

DEAR EDITOR:

One of my favorite STF mags (3 guesses, now) arrived on the newsstands the first and of course I bought it. (And, with that cover, that's really loyalty.) Then I read it, every bit. I cannot understand people who don't read a story because it is too long or because they get confused in the middle. I aim to get my money's worth, even if I have to read the stories three times to understand them. And sometimes I have to.

And so, now, right here, I will try to rate almost the whole mag. Here goes:

The Cover: That is the worst cover I have ever seen on any STF mag. Positively sickening. But, (aha! A bright spot in this gloom!) Mr. Martin's illi on page 61 is the best one in the ish. Maybe he ought to stick to that type, huh?

The Stories: First place goes to Bradbury's *Million Year Picnic*. Besides Leinster, Hamilton, and Geier, he's my favorite. How about some more from each?

2. *Prisoner of the Brain Mistress*. I like Walton, too.

3. *Space-Lane of No-Return*. A misleading title, but a nice type of short. Doesn't beat about the bush.

4. *Captives of the Weir-Wind*. Interesting speculation, but rather improbable.

5. *Lorelei of the Red Mist*. Rather deep and morbid. If this is Brackett—GAAAAA! I arrive at this conclusion by attributing the good parts to Bradbury.

6. *The Shadow-Gods*. Somewhat disappointing.

7. *The Pumpkin Eater*. Almost anyone could write one of those. Shame, shame, Mr. Whitehorn.

And now I will jump on some of the poor deluded Viziwriters.

Going down the line, I see that Mr. R. R. Anger bears commentary. I agree with him on the pic's influence on a story. Witness how Hollingsworth's feeble blockprints ruined *What Hath Me?* for me in the Spring number. I also would like more editorial comment. This fellow beats even the Mad Chad, my old favorite, so give the man first place.

Mr. Warner, may I say that I enjoy being as you describe me, just as long as I get my seasonal P. S. (Why, oh why, dear ed., doesn't it go bi-monthly, or even monthly?)

Mr. Shore isn't the only one, I notice, that's stuck on ye honorable Sen. Claghorn. Claghorn, that is.

Gerry Williams is in her usual groove . . . O.K. And may I say, for all the uninformed morons who read this section, that a BEM is a bug-eyed monster. (I feel like a fool for saying that, but somebody had to.) (Thanks—new Ed.)

E. Rogers seems a trifle unfair in his criticism of us arm-chair editors. If we didn't speak up, how would Mr. Whitehorn know what we want? Also, I am not embarrassed by the lurid covers on STF mags, but I don't think that they help STF's reputation any.

Merry Merle is bats if he doesn't like a thrilling psychological story like "Defense Mech." I didn't know his type was allowed to have anything sharper than a crayon.

The P. P. of P. is going deeper into this

literary business, but I still tag manfully along. He takes second place.

I would like to know what is eating Robert A. (for atavist, no doubt) Bradley. Nice going, Editor.

Thanx to T. Jewett, I now know Dunkelberger's address. Methinks I shall also write him, on the subject of a membership in the N. triple-F.

Sigler gets third place, even if I didn't understand all of his letter.

And now, having exhausted my space, I'll just say so long—not good by. (I'll get me a picture yet.)

Fan-attically (haven't I heard that before?)

NORMAN W. STORER.

P.S. How about some covers by the guy that painted those sharp pics in the March 4th issue of *Life* on a trip to the Moon? Or is it possible?

## WE GOT PLENTY OF RED SPAGHETTI

865 20th Ave. South  
St. Petersburg, Fla.

DEAR EDITOR:

Good lord, man, what have you done? . . . All of us fans who have been yelping about the BEMS on yer covers never actually thought you'd take 'em off. But, now you have actually done it, we weren't prepared! Great Ghu..! No BEM on a cover of an ish of P. S.? Fandom is quaking to its very foundations!!!

But now on to the Summer '46 No. of PLANET. . . . *Lorelei of the Red Mist*—pretty good; Brackett and Bradbury come up to their usual standards of excellence! Let's have more of the same. *Space-Lane of No-Return*—very good, excellent, swell! . . . . . (I liked it, too). *The Pumpkin Eater* and *The Million Year Picnic* were also O.K.

By the way, yer new cover artist is pretty good—especially that section of the cover that showed the space-ship (?) bursting up out of the sea of red spaghetti was hyper!

And now to La Vizi . . . Re: Phil Warner's letter, he is turning out to be another Buchannon. And before I forget it, here is my vote for the three pic winners for the last issue: Roy Tidwell, Chad Oliver—and Lewis Sherlock, because of all that science-stuff that I copied from his letter for a science report in school.

And remember, among those who know prozines best, its P.S., two to one! (Duh-forty-vee-vah-yurple-glurble-bleep-bem-snafu-huba sprl-fsk-SOLD STFANS!)

Clear ether until next ish!

FANTastically yours,

LINWOOD CARTER.

## DOES ANYTHING HELP?

505 Belknap Place  
San Antonio 1, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

Does it help to start a letter with the words, "I have never written to a magazine be4?" or "since the birth of 'P. S.' I have been a constant reader?"

If it does, then I'm sunk. I have written to dozens of mags, without success I admit, but at least I have tried. I have read P. S. off and on since the Vol 1, No. 1 copy, but I also can say the same for various other S. F. mags, so you don't rate so high.

Just to be diff., I shall not comment on a single story, I read them all; the ones I like, I like, the ones I don't like, I say to myself: "So what? Maybe my neighbor up in Maine, or over in Cal. —or some other place (The dark side of the moon?) gets a kick out of it." Anyway, variety never hurts, and I have yet to read a "P. S." in which I failed to enjoy some of the stories. When that issue is printed, I'll send you a gripe that will stop all gripes, and scare all B.E. M.'s a bright sky blue pink.

So, since I never was much afraid of what people would say, I'll pick at the Viz fans a bit and maybe put in a word of advice, futile and useless as it may be.

I think first I'll take a slap at the bum who calls himself Phil Warner. Sentenced to be bashed in the noze with 3 rotten oranges.

One dozen roses and an orchid to you, Ernest Rodgers. Them's my sentiments, too.

Chad Oliver raises a very debatable question, but then what Texan would be happy without being in on something?—one vote for having an inquiring nature.

To Robert A. Bradley—if it were possible to do so I'd give all 3 places to this sensible letter writer. However, the maximum number of votes for first place, and a toast to his health.

Lewis Sherlock—what we need here is a worry wort. Let's give him second place, although I'm not a scientist.

Sorry I can't agree with Edwin Sigler for that first paragraph—6 Raw Peanuts. The second one rates a mind stretcher—for widening purposes only. The last paragraph gives one-half of one vote for third place.

Now that I've done so much, I'll finish off by adding my vote to those asking for bi-monthly Planets, improved pics, etc.; like others, I am somewhat of a stickler for accuracy, so, not having anything to say of which I am so much as vaguely sure I'll take my leave as quietly as possible.

Cordially,

R. G. WAITE.

## YOU ONLY NEED A "B" CARD FOR PLUTO, PAL!

1809 College Ave.  
Indianapolis, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

This is my first letter to a mag (what? Another one?), and I too have a few suggestions to make. First, why not just let that select few who use the Viz for their private bickerings have one big royal get-together and hash out all of their difficulties at one time and thereby rid that department of one of its worst eye-sores? Second—PLEASE!—no more of the (?) Mad STF Fan (?) . . . one Bill Groover (sounds like his mother was scared by a Hoover button). His type (?) detracts from a mag of (?) quality (I'm a little stuck on that parentheses question mark parentheses combination) and I'm sure you want to make your mag—pardon me—OUR mag, the best of its type. Third, I don't think your novels are too short, nor do I think they are too long. I like a mag with stories that have a pretty fair smattering of technical detail in them, even if I don't understand half of them.

I have been reading STF mags for about four years, three months, and five days. I'm not sure about that but I think I have given a fairly close approximation. Now there is something that I have been meaning to write some mag and try to



have it corrected. I didn't have nerve enough to until I saw a letter in the Spring '46 ish by a fellow by the name of Bransford Littleton, but now . . . NOW . . . I have been filled with an all consuming fire to ride out like a knight in armor to right the evils of an evil world. In all stories in which even a hint of rocket ships is given they all are small sleek jobs just as empty inside as a barn . . . except when the Martians or alien worlders attack, then they miraculously become cigar-shaped arsenals . . . and they always have enough fuel to blast from here to hel'gon without having to refuel.

Another thing that is done is the constant waste of this unexhaustible fuel reserve by keeping the engines working at all times—ENTIRELY UNCALLED FOR. Wouldn't they have to land from time to time to replace the worn-out combustion chambers? Why can't they be practical and just coast on their inertia? A good book for your authors to read would be Willy Ley's book printed in 1945 by the Viking Publishing Co. Mr. Ley, as you probably know, was once vice-president of the Verein fur Rhaumschiffahrt (literal translation: Rocket Society), an organization that did more to further the interests of men who really believe that interplanetary flight will someday be ours and which flourished in Germany before Hitler rose to power. In his book he retells the history of the most important theories on space travel. I found these stories very interesting and informing.

He also tells some of his experiences with the society and tells some interesting things about such well-known men as Dr. Robert Goddard and Max Werner. His book is full of technical details told in such a way that the reader is left with the impression that he has learned all there is to know—up to date—about the theory and actual practicability of space travel. He also takes into consideration the law of inertia and the possibility of using atomic energy for a means of power.

I will NOT, at any time, give my ratings of the stories printed in your mag, because I feel that no one person is capable of splitting to such an extent as to say that one story printed in your mag is better than any other.

I have not yet written to Mr. Littleton but I am with him in his fight for the removal of the atrocious waste of fuel in your stories.

If anyone wishes to discuss this, I, too, will be glad to oblige.

Sincerely,  
JACK MURRELL.

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*Charles Atlas*

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